



The Challenge of Okitegami Kyouko

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Chapter 1:

Miss Kyouko's Alibi Testimony

1

Kujirai did not have any particular intentions of pulling off the perfect crime. Never an avid reader of detective novels- in the first place- he didn't have an accurate understanding of what the term perfect crime even meant. At the point his hands were sullied in crime, he understood all too well it was leagues away from perfect; to start with, if such perfection truly did exist, Kujirai would never have had to retire from the world of competitive swimming—his unrewarded present state had already been proven by the world as a whole to an unnatural degree.

However, even if it wasn't perfect, the need to aim for perfection was only human nature, and even if it was impossible to achieve completion with the whole, perfecting an individual part of it was a conceivable possibility—or so Kujirai thought. Otherwise, there was far too little salvation. And as long as one portion was complete, it was surely possible to feign completion in the larger picture.

Taken to the logical extreme, no matter how much evidence remained, no matter how clear the motive was—as long as the suspect's alibi was unshakable, then as far as the law was concerned, it was impossible to make him out as guilty.

Alibi—right, the proof of absence from the scene.

The evidence he was not at the site of the murder.

Originally, that alone would be the minimum necessity.

And so it was, that on that day, at three in the afternoon, Kujirai found himself walking around the business district to forge his unshakable alibi; it wasn't as if he had any concrete plan. In order to aim for perfection, to move however the situation called for, Kujirai intentionally neglected to plan out the details. If he scheduled out the finer details, the evidence might remain, he convinced himself somewhat neurotically. From the start, Kujirai knew he would definitely be placed under suspicious once the matter came to light—he may have been paranoid, but it was a justified paranoia.

Now then, the most reliable evidence would have to be being witnessed by a large number of people, and have them testify 'he was there'; however, society is blind to the individual to a surprising degree. When he wasn't famous by any accounts, if he wanted to leave an impression on a great many 'eyes', he would either have to cause an outburst in public, or take some eccentric behavior. If possible, he wanted to avoid standing out or the worse. Gathering strange attention carried a danger of hindering his actions thereafter.

That's why, at most, as natural as could be, he needed to leave an impression on a third party—third party. Right, it went without saying that whoever testified to Kujirai's alibi would have to be a third party—and the more of a third party they were, the more complete his alibi would be.

He had heard that family testimony was too weak for an alibi, and in that case, a close friend's words couldn't be too strong either—the most desirable person was one with absolutely no relations to himself, if possible, someone he was meeting for the first time.

With that on his mind, Kujirai prowled the main street—he came to a stop. More precisely, his eyes came to a stop—his eyes locked onto a single woman reading through a paperback as she elegantly sipped her coffee on a café terrace.

It was a sight that made for an exceptionally pretty picture. As her hair was all white, for a moment, he misread her age, but on closer inspection, she was a young woman whose age wasn't much different from his own. It would be quite odd if she was dying her hair to be fashionable... but her tight skirt that went to knee length, and her three-quarter-sleeve blouse gave off a charmingly downto-earth aura. The glasses she wore made her seem somewhat intellectual.

" "

Of course, to Kujirai, there was absolutely no need for her to be the one giving testimony—anyone would do. It could be someone from the next table, or just as well the table across. But how miserable would it be if he spent too much time being nitpicky and he exceeded the three o' clock he needed an alibi for?

With that on his mind, the white hair began to look convenient. With that characteristic hairstyle, she should be considerably easy to search out at a later date—especially with beauty on her level. Surely she will be the one to prove my innocence—Kujirai thought as he approached with a grin.

Not knowing anything about her.

2

"Is this seat open?"

Kujirai said as he pulled back the seat across from the white-haired woman. Softly raising her eyes from the book she'd been reading,

"Go right ahead,"

She conceded surprisingly easily.

"I was just in the business of looking for someone to talk to."

Having thought the conversation would start with confusion, Kujirai tasted something similar to a letdown, but just because that was the direction, that was no reason not to sit—after a glance at his wristwatch, Kujirai lowered himself down.

He placed a drink order with the waiter who came by—granted, every single entry on the menu was coffee. A long listing of nothing but brands Kujirai didn't know.

So this was a coffee specialist store... A quick glance and the whitehaired woman's cup didn't verify any traces of the use of sugar or milk. It did seem she drank it black; that was a little different from her fluffy appearance suggested. While he wasn't trying to compete, Kujirai ordered it black as well.

"Are you alone? Or are you waiting for someone?"

"I'm alone. I'm generally alone."

The woman closed her book. As it was draped in a hand-madelooking cover, he couldn't read the title.

"It turned out that I'm off from work this afternoon, so I've got myself some time to spare. Well, it can't be too rare."

"Work... hmm. What do you do?"

It was midday on a weekday. At the very least, she couldn't be an office worker. Granted, Kujirai was in pretty much the same boat.

"Umm, I can't give the specifics, but I conduct inquiries on this and that. But I didn't expect that today's inquiry would finish before noon... It's a real problem to be too fast at your job."

She said quite carefree—with how calm and level she seemed, she didn't look like the type to work with such speed. Inquiry... was she taking surveys or something? Certainly, if such a beauty called out, he felt like he'd respond to any poll she handed out.

"And what do you do?"

"Oh, I'm an instructor at a swimming school."

He divulged his identity.

"Hmm. No wonder you have such a splendid physique. Your job must be training you hard."

He didn't expect to hear that. He didn't think he was wearing the sort of clothes that would show the lines of his body...

"Can I ask for your name? I'm Kujirai."

"It's Kyouko. A pleasure to meet you."

"Kyouko-san."

Once again, he was surprised with how easily she told him—He couldn't help but repeat it back meaninglessly. Did this person called Kyouko-san have no wariness towards an unfamiliar man she was meeting for the first time? As long as she'd testify to his alibi, then even if she treated him coldly, he thought that would be perfectly fine, but... it kinda felt like there was hope after all. Although rather than a lack of wariness, he felt it more precise to say that she had leisure—the sort of leisure that no matter what happened, she could handle it at her own discretion.

Perhaps Kyouko-san was a fake name—though Kujirai wouldn't be particularly troubled even if that was the case.

"Kyouko-san, do you come here often?"

Once the coffee (by the way, based off Kujirai's common sense, it was an outrageously priced coffee) was brought over, Kujirai took a sip (once again by his common sense, it was an outrageously bitter and sour coffee) as he asked.

This wasn't simple curiosity.

If Kyouko-san was a foreigner and she said it was her first time coming to this shop and this town, he feared it might be difficult to track her down later—while he may have been reading too deeply into it, if it were to create a complete alibi, it was better the more thought he put in.

"Who knows... I wonder."

But there, Kyouko-san offered a strangely evasive answer.

"Judging by the barista's attitude, it does seem I might be a regular, but I couldn't say."

".....? Mnn, that so."

It was considerably hard to retort when she said it with such a gentle smile—well, if she was working in the area through the morning, she probably didn't live too far away, Kujirai decided. He couldn't quite ask a complete stranger where they lived...

Taking the adequate sense of distance for one giving testimony, he was better off refraining from asking for phone numbers or emails. He had to forge a relation for 'here and now'. While it did feel like a waste, the testimony itself was something of a promise to meet again, taking a patient stance did seem for the best.

Whatever the case, for that day his undivided attention was to make an alibi.

"What are you reading?"

Kujirai pointed at the book Kyouko-san had closed and placed to the side—it was a somewhat thick paperback. He wasn't very interested, to be honest, but he needed to pick a topic.

"It's a mystery novel. A collection of Sunaga Hirubee's short stories. Have you read it?"

While Kyouko-san did open the cover and flash the contents, it was naturally a book Kujirai didn't know—he'd never even heard the title. But the words mystery novel gave him a start, as someone right in the midst of forging an alibi.

"Is it interesting?"

"Yes, quite. It's got my recommendation—especially the story I just finished, 'Sentenced to Conversion' is a masterpiece."

"Hmm. And what sort of story was it?"

"I can't tell you that. It would be a spoiler. Mystery novels are about the mystery."

"Oh c'mon, just tell me."

"I wouldn't dare."

While he wasn't that interested, when she refuted him so obstinately, it was human nature to grow curious.

"Then just up to where it's not a spoiler."

"Well, it's a short story, you know. No matter what I say, it will spoil something... if I had to say, it's a story about how a convicted criminal is reformed after that."

That really didn't get anything across.

I'll have to read it on my own... Kujirai thought as he tentatively recorded the book title and author name on his phone's memo pad. Honestly, he couldn't imagine he'd have the opportunity to read it, but it might prove useful somewhere.

"Do you have any other mystery novels you'd recommend?"

If reading was her hobby, he thought he could kill time by hearing out her impressions of her favorite story, but with that approach, the bottleneck of mystery novel spoilers would seal her lips, so Kujirai changed topic. The plan was apparently a success.

The Challenge of Okitegami Kyouko

"My favorite mystery, it's from quite a while ago, but... do you mind?"

"Oh no, go right ahead."

"Well then,"

Kyouko-san began to prattle on.

Kujirai concentrated and listened—it was, of course, to form an alibi, but as she joyfully spoke on about her favorite books, it was hard to say there was nothing he found captivating.

3

After that, Kujirai took ample time, over an hour talking to Kyoukosan. When it came to his honest impression, it was an enjoyable exchange he wanted to continue, but that would be putting the cart before the horse.

"Ah... crap. I'm sorry, I had an arrangement tonight. I've got to get going."

While a bit like an excuse, somewhat intentional-sounding, he gave his piece and picked up both cheques as he stood from his seat. "Is that so?" Kyouko-san didn't particularly try to stop him.

That being the case, as they parted, Kyouko smiled and waved her hand, "Well then, some other time, if we ever meet again, please do try seducing me from scratch." She said, so perhaps Kujirai's sudden exit did ruin her mood—not that there was anything he could do about it.

He couldn't dawdle and let someone else discover the scene first—Kujirai had to be the first witness no matter what. More so, it was no exaggeration to say he had forged a complete alibi solely to be the first to stumble upon it. Walking to the nearest station with slightly-hastened gait, he hopped on the tram.

It didn't take long to reach his destination—the apartment where Unagi lived. Room 702 of the complex—he had once frequented the place and even owned a spare key, there was no way he'd get lost.

Still, be that as it may, he was nervous. Couldn't he still turn back now? Wasn't there some other way? He felt the temptation might take him. But he was gravely aware of how impossible that was.

There was already no turning back.

He would do what he had to, carry out what must be done—for appearance's sake, he tried the intercom to Room 702 to no response. After pressing it a second, a third time, he had prepared himself to take the spare key from his pocket.

He undid the two locks starting from the top and opened the door by the time he removed his shoes and took a step into the dark insides, his resolve had been made. Rather than resolve, perhaps it was more accurate to say he had killed his emotions.

He was the first on the scene, he didn't have to care about fingerprints. Upon entering, he immediately opened the door to the bathroom. No one was there. However, a cord plugged into the sink socket was stretched to its limit, stretching towards the shower. With the cord in the way, the shower room's folding door couldn't close completely.

Kujirai threw that door open all the same. The cord from the sink led right into the bathtub. The appliance in the large tub was a dryer, just as expected.

As expected.

In the bathwater, Unagi was dead.

Electrocuted... was the pain only for an instant? Did it drag on a long time? There was no way Kujirai who hadn't experienced it would know, but whatever the case, he quietly pulled his phone

from his pants pocket. For the first time in his life, with no need to enter the password, he placed a call to that number that didn't incur any fees.

And he spoke in as great of a panic as he could muster.

"H... hello!? I-is this the police!? Somebody's been killed!"

4

As the first person on the scene, Kujirai was questioned by a scary-faced police inspector called Hijiori—so scary, in fact, that for a moment Kujirai hesitated to undo the chain on the door. Unable to believe such a manga-esque officer existed in real life, he was bewildered at the notion he had slipped into fiction. Perhaps that alone was proof enough that his standing was still hazy.

Of course, Officer Hijiori heard out the details behind the corpse's discovery with a gentlemanly attitude unbefitting his face. He was tactful of Kujirai, who had stumbled upon the corpse of a dear friend; you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, or rather, look at things with open eyes, or rather, whatever the case, Kujirai felt a hint of guilt at that one.

Of course, as long as he was giving false testimony, it was only natural for him to feel guilty.

'I came by because I was invited over, only to find my friend electrocuted in the bathtub'—those were the essentials of Kujirai's account and he didn't throw in any superfluous detail. The more he fabricated, the more seams would show. It was not his job to exercise his wisdom, that one was for the police.

And naturally again, he wasn't asked for his alibi there on the site—at the moment, it was being treated as an accidental death, and until the autopsy gave its result, the estimated time of death was unknown. It would be a later date that the effects of his alibi construction on the café terrace would bear its fruit.

If I get to meet Kyouko when that happens, I've got to apologize for leaving so abruptly—or so, Kujirai thoughts were somewhat off the mark as he left the crime scene.

Perhaps I should say, as expected, the police moved far faster than he had anticipated, and the next day, Officer Hijiori dropped by Kujirai's apartment with two of his men. Admittedly, that storyline of 'Using a hair dryer in the bath leading to accidental electrocution' was pretty impossible to start with, so it was no miracle that suspicions of murder were soon to follow.

He didn't care. No matter how inconceivable his storyline was, as long as his alibi was complete, no one would be able to make Kujirai guilty.

"Kujirai-san. My apologies, but it does seem your relationship with the victim Unagi-san was not the sort of relationship one would call close friends... it seems that lately, Unagi-san has all but broken off all relations. And yet, why, on that day, did you drop by his residence?"

Well, I guess that's true, said he. Just asking around Unagi's circumference would easily elucidate that fact—if he knew it was going to come to this, he wouldn't have badmouthed Unagi so thoughtlessly, but unfortunately, Kujirai did not hold the power of precognition.

"As I said, I was called out... we're both adults here, I didn't hate the idea of forgetting past grudges and renewing an old friendship."

"Is it true you were also indebted to Unagi-san?"

The one who intruded with those words wasn't Hijiori, but one of his subordinates behind him. From the man's hot-blooded zeal, it was as if he had already concluded Kujirai was the culprit—perhaps he was one of Unagi's fans as a competitive swimmer.

While Kujirai had no recollection of being in any debt to Unagi, perhaps he had borrowed some slight living expenses here and there when they still got along—though saying that would be a tad off the mark.

"After investigating the room, it was found that a large sum of money had disappeared. Kujirai-san, while you are certainly employed as an instructor at a sports gym, you only work there part-time, and you barely even get any work at all—have you ever been troubled with money."

While he never thought he'd be treated as pretty much unemployed, such a blatant declaration of doubt made it easy for him to change the topic.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Don't tell me I'm a suspect?"

"You'll have to pardon him. He's quite new at this."

It was there that, unexpectedly, Hijiori lowered his head—it really threw off his tempo when the scary-faced officer acted in such a way. If that was intentional, he really is something.

"However, it is in our best interest to remove any and all mystery. So could you please tell us? Yesterday, around three in the afternoon, where were you and what were you doing?"

"Is this one of those alibi investigations?"

Kujirai answered with half a laugh. Lightly acting out exactly what he'd seen in a police drama—that was just a scene from his everyday life, it would be unnatural to recall it too fast. He knew he had to pretend to think.

"At any rate, as you've indicated, I'm not getting proper work. Yeaaah, as I recall, I went out to get Unagi a gift so I left home early and loitered outside..."

"A gift?"

"Ah, pardon, I didn't buy anything in the end. You could call it neglecting my friends, but I didn't want to seem overly patronizing..."

"Did you go shopping alone?"

To the question of the subordinate who was still new at this, "Yes, so I don't really have anyone who can back up my..." he got up to when, "Ah, but, that's right, come to think of it."

He pretended to recall.

"You said around three, right? It's at that time that old Unagi was killed?"

"This hasn't been concluded to be a murder yet. Please just answer what's been asked of you."

Hijiori held back the subordinate that leaned in with those words, "Come to think of it, what happened next?" he asked like a gentleman.

"I did have a nice conversation with a lady. I think that was around three... the talks dragged on for a while." "A lady? I see. Was she an acquaintance?"

"No, a stranger..."

Playing pickup, eh, one of the subordinates spat a whisper—not a police officer for nothing, it seemed he boasted a rigid sense of values. Though Kujirai found it wholly unexpected for his actions to be labeled as a pickup attempt.

"We simply shared a table for around an hour. Though we parted without exchanging contact information, so I doubt this will prove my alibi..."

"No, please tell me the store name, and the woman's characteristics. I do think we'll be able to back your story."

Well of course. It would be quite troubling otherwise. Leaving all the backing to the police was the backbone of this perfect alibi.

"Unfortunately, I don't remember as far as the shop's name. Did I keep the receipt..."

"But you at least know the location, correct?"

"Yes, it was only yesterday, so I haven't forgotten."

Kujirai tottered just enough so it didn't seem intentional as he explained the shop's location relative to the nearest station. It did seem he wasn't completely new at this, as the subordinate quite easily pinned down the corresponding café on his smartphone map.

"I see. And what sort of woman were you talking to?"

"Umm, her age as around the same as mine, but her hair was all white and—"

"Hah!?"

In that instant, Hijiori who had consistently maintained a gentlemanly attitude with the 'suspect' Kujirai raised his voice in disarray. While flustered by that threatening cry, Kujirai didn't know what exactly had instigated it, so he had no choice but to go on.

"W-white hair, with a gentle air, a fashionable woman who wore glasses—she read a mystery novel as she sipped black coffee. H-her name was—"

"Kyouko-san."

He was beaten to the punch.

Kujirai was taken aback—why did he know? Ignoring Kujirai's surprise, Hijiori—alongside his two subordinates— were holding their heads. Now this was beyond confusing. Just going off their attitude, it did seem they knew about Kyouko-san, or at least someone who fit the part, but in that case, it should be a cause for joy; it would save them quite a bit of trouble. The reaction of holding their heads didn't fit in with Kujirai's sense of reality.

No, could it be they were lamenting that the prime suspect Kujirai's alibi was being established? Or so he thought, but the words that finally came from Officer Hijiori's mouth ran contrary to his expectations.

"Kujirai-san. You shared a table with her yesterday, correct? In that case, I feel sorry for you, but your alibi can't be established."

"Pardon?"

"The reason being, that person—Kyouko-san. Okitegami Kyouko-san is the forgetful detective."

Forgetful—detective?

5

"Hah? I have absolutely no idea. Kujirai-san? Who's that supposed to be? Doesn't even tickle the heartstrings of my memory. I don't remember going out for tea the day before yesterday either. I haven't the slightest recollection what I did that morning or that evening."

The next morning. Upon receiving the expected response from the forgetful detective who'd been called to the police station, Officer Hijiori held his head, just as he had in the suspect's apartment the day before. Forgetful Detective.

Chief of the Okitegami Detective Agency: Okitegami Kyouko.

White hair and classes, a gentle air, a young woman—truly fashionable, and it's been said that no one's ever seen her wear the same clothing twice. She was one of those so-called 'great detectives' a portion of the population may treat as idols, but even among them, she was a somewhat enigmatic existence.

"... To start off, who are you? You called me out like an acquaintance, but have we met somewhere before?"

She blankly asked such a thing—he felt crestfallen at those words. In all his life as a police officer, the numerous difficult cases that carved grave impressions on his life—for instance, the Three-Consecutive Abduction Murder Case and the Signal Attempted Defection Case—it was no exaggeration to say they had walked the boundary of life and death together, and yet to have her take such

a distance, no matter how many times he experienced it, was never a pleasant feeling. Even if he knew in his heart that was what made her the forgetful detective.

"My name is Hijiori. Officer Hijiori. I have investigated with you in the past."

"Oh, I see. To think I have cooperated with the police, there is nothing more a private detective can ask for. Why this is quite the honor."

Or so Kyouko-san offered some incomprehensible answer—however, right after, "But I've already forgotten about it, so please don't bring up the past. As my duty of confidentiality as a detective, I mustn't recall any of my jobs," she added on.

That was how it worked with Okitegami Kyouko.

As he wasn't a brain specialist, Officer Hijiori didn't have a precise understanding of the theory behind it, but it was a fact that Kyoukosan's memories reset each day. She was unable to accumulate experience.

No matter what sort of day she spends, she'll have completely forgotten it come the next—no matter what difficult case, what classified information she treads into, she won't remember.

In an era of misgivings towards the disclosure of private and confidential information, there was no greater means to adhere to absolute confidentiality—and in that regard, the Okitegami Detective Agency had secured itself a niche no other could hope to follow in.

Now just between you and me, the top brass of the police force have been in her care more than a few times—it should normally never come to be that an officer relies on a civilian detective, but when the detective you request is just going to forget, it gave way to a strange sense of lenience.

As such, the forgetful detective could at times be treated as an exceedingly priceless treasure—however, the story changed when she stepped on stage to testify for a suspect's alibi.

More so, if it had to come to this, they would have been better off if the suspect actually did have a firm alibi—of course, if they asked the café staff and examined the footage of the security cameras in the area, it might be possible to get some backing, more or less, but if the central point, the only individual who actually spoke with the suspect face to face didn't remember in the slightest, it was largely meaningless.

Officer Hijiori had never heard such an incomplete alibi before—albeit, nothing good would come of blaming the detective before his eyes.

"Understood. I apologize for calling you so early in the morning, Kyouko-san—thank you for your time."

"Yes, I do apologize I couldn't be of use."

She said, as—still seated—she lowered her head down so low it might smash into the table. She stayed like that, it didn't seem her white head was rising.

It's nothing for you to apologize for, Officer Hijiori was about to follow up; but, come to think of it, as Kyouko-san didn't have any

memory of the matter, there was no logical reason for her to feel apologetic. Then it was best to consider this apology didn't have any meaning beyond social courtesy.

In the midst of that thought, Kyouko-san finally raised her face, she looked at the officer all smiles—why was she smiling?

"... Err, Kyouko-san."

"Yes, what could it be."

"Umm... I have nothing left to ask you, so you can leave if you want to."

"I see,"

She replied, and yet the detective made no attempt to leave—she didn't even stand from her seat. Simply in silence, the look in her eyes pleading something.

"D-do you have some business from your side?"

"Oh, no, now that you've made such a strong request, I have no choice left but to reservedly get to business,"

Kyouko-san started off as if she'd been waiting for that.

"As a civilian, it pains my heart dearly that I could be of no use to the good boys in blue. So how about it? Won't you allow the Chief of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko to lend her power to the investigation? Inept as I may be, I would be happy to oblige."

"You're going... to help out?"

"Why yes, of course, I have a strict adherence to confidentiality."

Kyouko-san indicated her selling point as the forgetful detective—and what a captivating temptation it was. It was more than he could hope for; even excluding confidentiality and what not, the reason the Okitegami Detective Agency was regarded so highly came down to the simple fact that Okitegami Kyouko was exceedingly proficient as a detective.

Otherwise, no matter how secretive she could be, she'd be of little service. The fastest detective who could solve any case in a day (because once that day was over, she'd forget about the incident)—and such a woman was offering her assistance to the investigation free of charge.

"Eh? Who said it was free of charge?"

As if to ask, what sort of nonsense is this man spewing, Kyouko-san put in a clear rejection.

"There's no way a grown adult would work for free. I'm saying that, as a special discount, I'll at least subtract the cost of tax."

"... I'm pretty sure your fees are already illegal."

As expected, she had barely any intent to apologize for her lack of use in testimony, and it seems this was nothing more than a brazen sales pitch.

With her gentle looks, she shrewdly calculated it out.

So this was what it meant to be a detective by trade... Kyouko-san wasn't the sort who would solve mysteries out of interest or concern.

"But well, I should be thankful for even a ten percent deduction. Understood, I officially request your cooperation, Kyouko-san."

Hijiori said and sought to shake her hand, but the woman in question said this in a fluster.

"When did... tax get up to ten percent?"

6

Even if it was only a few percent off, Kyouko-san felt the regret in her whole body at having given a bigger discount than expected, and as that was going on, Officer Hijiori had finished the procedure. Meaning, he got permission from his direct superior to allow the cooperation of a civilian private detective. While his superior showed disapproval at first, upon learning they were dealing with Okitegami Kyouko of the Okitegami Detective Agency, their attitude immediately changed. That superior got permission with the superior's superior, and the superior's superior handled matters with the superior's superior's superior—an hour later and all the problems were cleared up.

Well, regardless of her proficiency, that woman has some fans in high places.

I couldn't be said Hijiori, who had dealt with her directly, was one of them. More so, with all the trouble he caused her, he could barely hold his head high when she was around... even so, if it were to resolve a case, being strung around be her selfishness a bit was the least of his worries.

"The victim was Unagi Kyuugo—a competitive swimmer. Ring any bells?"

When he said that to Kyouko, who had finally recovered from the shock of failed price negotiation, she shook her head.

"It's outside my expertise," she contested.

That was understandable—or rather inevitable.

Just as she didn't know about the rise in taxes, or had more precisely forgotten about them, Kyouko-san, who could not continuously maintain memory, was unable to update her knowledge beyond a certain period. There was no way she would know a swimmer who had only distinguished himself in the past few years.

There was even less reason for her to know the suspect Kujirai.

"He was only twenty-seven? How young, he has my condolences."

Kyouko-san put her hands together towards the victim's profile picture. After a little while with a faithful expression,

"And what was the cause of death?"

She moved matters forward. The speed at which she changed gears in that regard, made her a professional that put the police to shame.

"Electrocuted in a bathtub... well, when it comes to dying at home, the bathroom's not a rare place to go, but I have to wonder about the electrocution."

Officer Hijiori said as he was about to pull a photo of the victim's body from the case files and hesitated for an instant. While it was his common sense at work, that showing a picture of a corpse to a woman might be too stimulating, "Don't mind me, officer,' said the woman in question. "No matter what gruesome crime scene I may see, I'll just forget it by tomorrow. It won't leave a trauma."

Right, that was also an advantage she had. The forgetful detective was indifferent to such occupational diseases—while he wouldn't

say he was confident in himself, Officer Hijiori had at least an average level of memory, and he could at most vaguely imagine it, but if they went at it with the thought, 'I'm going to forget anyway,' perhaps humans can stop feeling fear and disgust.

Whether that's a happy notion or not... at the very least, as a detective, this woman could issue a level-headed decision without having her emotions thrown out of order.

Officer Hijiori handed over a few pictures—pictures of Unagi who had died in the bathtub.

"Oh my. His expression's far more serene than I anticipated. Since you said he was electrocuted, I thought he would have died with his eyes bulging out and his mouth wide open."

"Well, I can't say there's no precedent, but... this time, it looks like there was no time to feel pain."

"How ironic it is that a swimmer passed in the bath. Hmmm. But as expected of an athlete. He has some wonderful muscle."

Quite naturally, Unagi was naked in the bathtub, but without any notable shame, Kyouko continued examining—Officer Hijiori thought it might be stimulating in that sense as well, but it seems his misgivings were misplaced in that regard as well.

"Is the item that's fallen in the tub a dryer? The cord is stretched out... mnn? Meaning the spark came when the dryer fell in while he was bathing?"

"We thought so at first—however,"

"There's some reason that can't be?"

Officer Hijiori nodded. No, of course, he couldn't guarantee it. There are quite a few people in the world who find the most unbelievable ways to use household appliances. Otherwise, the instruction manuals that came with them wouldn't have to be so bulky—to try drying one's washed hair as they submerged themselves in the bathtub was practically suicide already, but perhaps it wouldn't be so peculiar to find a veteran who didn't wince from the act. But surely such a veteran would never let it slip from their hand.

"But for a competitive swimmer with such a promising future, such a slip up is... my apologies, it's just hard to imagine such a dishonorable death. But more than that,"

"More than that, it is more logical to assume there was a third party who shoved the dryer into the bathtub?"

This time, he didn't nod—when someone got the jump on him like that, it made him feel as if he had been carrying out shallow deductions. Perhaps picking up on that feeling,

"In that case, I feel the same," Kyouko-san added on. "While it does seem like a peculiar means of murder at first, for an athlete who had trained his body, rather than bludgeoning or stabbing, aiming for when they are bathing is, in a sense, far more efficient. It would be difficult to put up a resistance while naked."

"... Back there, you said it was ironic how a swimmer died in a tub, but there's another ironic thing to note. Unagi-san's nickname among the fans was the 'Eel of the Pool', it seems."

"Eel? Aah, because he's Unagi-san. But what's ironic about that?"

"No, see, electric eel..."

"... I see. The electrocution. But you know, the electric eel isn't a real eel. It's a knifefish."

So that might be a bit of a stretch—when Kyouko-san pointed that out, the Officer felt like he'd been crushed at the root. But regaining himself,

"I'm just thinking, perhaps someone close to the victim purposely chose that way to kill him... with that thought, we performed a sweep of Unagi-san's surroundings, and surprisingly enough, the first person to stumble upon the body, the victim's friend came up as the top suspect." He continued on.

"To suspect the first on the scene is something like common sense to a detective like me, but... the person you are referring to is that nice old Kujirai-san, who went as far as to treat me to coffee, right?"

"Yes, Kujirai Ruka... I called him the victim's friend, but their friendly relation is a thing of the past, and beyond a certain point, they pretty much severed all ties."

"... So they grew estranged?"

"More accurately became at odds. You could say they hated one another. It's hard to tell whether that went as far as murderous intent... however, we can't ignore the fact that individual was the first to come upon the body."

"That we cannot."

Kyouko-san said with a shrug of her shoulders.

"If this were a mystery novel, he'd be so suspicious that, on the contrary, no one would suspect him, but... it's nonfiction. However, there's some time elapsed between when he stumbled upon the corpse and called the cops, and the victim's estimated time of death. And that is why you called me to back up his alibi."

"You're as quick on the uptake as ever. The victim's estimated time of death is three 'o five in the afternoon. What we wanted to ask you about was Kujirai-san's alibi at that time."

"? Three... o' five? You can tell a time of death in minute increments?"

Kyouko-san dubiously asked. Indeed, under normal circumstance, if no one directly witnessed the moment of death, an estimated time would span a few hours. No matter how quickly the body was found, there was no way to identify the exact minute.

However, it was quite possible in this case.

"The room's breaker was tripped. Presumably when the dryer hit the water."

"I see."

"As a result, all electronic appliances in the room stopped—to summarize, we have a clear snapshot of the time the breaker tripped, meaning the time Unagi-san was electrocuted."

"... Do we? Is there really any telling when exactly the breaker..."

"For example, his time-shift machine stopped recording at that time. We looked into the exact moment the preserved recording cut off." Stopping mid-sentence upon noticing a question mark dancing about Kyouko-san's white hair, Officer Hijiori noticed—that's right, I have to explain what a time-shift machine is. Unlike the dryer, that recording device was a more recent invention, outside the scope of Kyouko-san's memory.

"Oh my, I see. So it continuously stores more than twenty-four hours, days' worth of whatever's playing: that's a surprising functionality. If only I had that much memory capacity—but that just means you know the time the breaker was flipped, and not the victim's time of death, correct?"

"...? Are you telling me there's a difference between the two?"

"There might be, and there might not—for example, if the time shift machine was set to stop by other means, it would be possible to fabricate the time the breaker went off..."

The deduction she illustrated surprised him—of course, in theory, it was like breaking a clock after forcing its needles in place, the same as an age-old means of alibi fabrication, but when she had only learned of the time-shift machine a moment ago, she was already crafting a theory around it. She wasn't a detective for nothing.

"That may be the case with the time-shift machine, but these days, apartments are loaded with all sorts of appliances. I do think it would be difficult to stop all their timers simultaneously."

"Is that so. Well, I'll leave that to looking at the scene after this... but at the estimated time of death, three 'o five, the suspect Kujiraisan said he was meeting with me?"

"That's right."

"Then he can't be the culprit, can he?"

"... Perhaps if you were able to vouch for his alibi."

While it was just now casually established he would be leading Kyouko-san to the scene afterward, whatever the case, that was the crux of the case. Incomplete as it was, the suspect had an alibi.

"You can't count on my testimony. In which case, Kujirai-san is still the lead suspect."

Kyouko-san had no restraint in saying. The way things were, Kujirai was even starting to seem pitiful—when normally, there would be no alibi more complete than one backed by a great detective's testimony. Granted, the pity was only limited to the case where he wasn't a murderer. As Kyouko-san said, at present, he was still the suspect in a murder case.

"Kujirai-san said he came to the apartment because the suspect invited him, correct? Were you able to confirm that?"

"Yeah. There was a call on the phone record. From Unagi-san to Kujirai-san, they've gotten in touch a number of times as of late. Though I couldn't tell you the contents of the call; it could even be the case he was demanding money back."

"Which means that could just as well have been the trigger for murder. Hmm... however, in that case, it would raise a separate question."

"A separate question? And what would that be?"

"Oh, just based on the investigation material, it says Kujirai-san was a competitive swimmer who competed with Unagi-san neck and neck, and even now he works as an instructor at a sports gym. In that case, he must have confidence in his physique. And yet, would he choose such an intricate method of murder?"

That was a viewpoint Officer Hijiori didn't have—judging by the impression he got yesterday and the day before, it did seem even after he had retired from competitive swimming, Kujirai had never neglected to train his body. You might say that was just his occupation, but seeing how he only instructed part-time, perhaps training was like a habit from his active days.

Whatever the case, if killing him in the bath was a means to prevent a scuffle with an athlete, Kujirai didn't quite fit the bill.

"While he might train, he was no match for the active competitor Unagi-san—he might have decided, but in that case, he must be quite the timid soul."

"Perhaps... he was striving for perfection."

"Or maybe,"

Kyouko-san placed the case resources down on the table—it seemed she had finished reading through from beginning to end.

"His method of murder was necessary to fabricate his alibi."

"To fabricate an alibi... is it?"

"While I cannot testify, if hypothetically, Kujirai-san's alibi, his proof of absence from the crime scene is real, that's what it would

have to mean—in order to form his own alibi, he had no choice but to choose that method of murder."

7

Allowing a civilian like Kyouko-san into the crime scene required a separate series of permissions, so it was afternoon by the time they arrived. Mustering up some courage, Hijiori did try inviting her out for lunch but, "We're short on time at the moment," she softly declined—it was a fact that the forgetful detective who was as a matter of fact incapable of investigating for more than a day hadn't the time for a leisurely meal. Hey munching on sweet bread side by side in the police car is quaint enough.

"For the residents of an athlete aiming for the Olympics, how should I put it... it's a normal apartment complex. You said he was famous, so I thought his residence was somewhere with firmer security."

"It may have been different if he actually won a gold at the Olympics, but... athlete in itself isn't as lucrative of an occupation as it seems."

Of course, it was a living environment that couldn't even be compared to the dilapidated two-story complex where Kujirai lived, but... the place seemed considerably removed from the victim's degree of fame and income.

"There's no automatic lock, no security camera at the door... while there's a camera in the elevator, you just have to use the stairs to avoid it... Unagi-san's room is on the seventh floor, right?"

"Yes, Room 702."

"Then even I could climb that high."

Steadily conducting an on-site inspection before visiting the scene, the two finally arrived before Room 702. The police investigation was already over, so the place wasn't deemed off limits. There was no one on watch. With the key borrowed from the management company, Hijiori opened the front door.

"Unagi-san lived alone, right? It seems he's borrowed quite the large room for a single person. He'd be better off living in a studio apartment in some building with better facilities."

Kyouko-san noted, upon observing the number of doors visible from the entranceway. That was the same question Hijiori himself held the first time he visited the room.

"He was quite the sociable fellow, and it seems he got a large room so he could call friends and juniors over... apparently the suspect Kujirai used to come quite often. That's why he had a spare key."

"Just by the sound of it, Kujirai-san might not be the only one with a key... you said he was the top suspect, but do you not have a second or third option?"

"Not at the moment... in that sense, you could say Kujirai-san might be our sole suspect."

Which meant if his alibi was real, they would be in a troublesome situation without anyone to suspect.

"Considering the disappearance of money, the possibility of a passing burglar can't be eliminated, but there are no traces of forced entry, so—there aren't any broken windows, and the bathroom didn't have a window to begin with."

"But if it was an accident, the missing money would be strange."

"Can't say for sure. It wasn't a precious metal, it was just cold hard cash. It's possible the man just used it up himself."

"Meaning the chances of accidental death still exist—now then,"

Kyouko-san said as she opened the door to the bathroom. Going right along to sliding open the bathing area's folding door, she took a look inside—while she didn't step in with her socks, as always, her flowing motions carried no wasted movements. Hijiori almost wished he had called in his subordinates so they could learn a thing or two.

"The bathing area is quite... wide. Both the shower and the tub..."

She said as she turned and looked at the nearest plug by the sink. She seemed to be measuring the distance by eye.

"A dryer cord isn't generally that long, I would think... it's quite a precarious distance. Whether anything plugged into the sink outlet could reach the tub."

"It did reach, just barely."

"Well I'm sure it did, but there really is no way to say it was particularly convenient... I doubt he could have been in such a rush to dry his hair that he would let himself feel so restricted—as long as he wasn't a considerable optimist, he would have at least considered the possibility of the cord overreaching and dropping the dryer out of his hand."

"Then you're saying it couldn't have been an accident?"

"Who can say... but I do think the cord's length is just as unreliable if it were to be used as a tool for murder."

It's a bit pushing it to make it look like an accident, so could there be some necessity to using the dryer? Kyouko-san said, while removing her socks. Mere socks they may be, but the way she pulled them off was strangely sensual, causing the officer to inadvertently avert his eyes—by the time he got another look, she was already gone. She was surveying the bathroom with her bare feet.

"Upsie daisy."

She entered the bathtub without hesitation. As it hadn't been filled, she didn't get wet from that, but the resolution behind each and every action she took was given far too eagerly. Albeit, she looked like she was attempting to assume the same posture as the victim.

"Kyouko-san, do you have a theory?"

"No, not at the moment. I just thought I'd try out whatever came to mind."

She stretched out her legs and tried touching the faucet—for someone of her small build, it was a modular tub that would let her bathe stretched out all she wanted. Well, as a place someone had died not too long ago, I have no choice but to call her sensitivities to stretch out far too brazen... even a veteran officer like Hijiori would be reluctant if he was ordered to do it.

"Mnn,"

With her arms folded, she stood. And maintaining a difficult look on her face, she returned to the dressing area. "Did you figure anything out?"

"While there are some things that have been answered, there are even more questions than before."

After those cryptic words, Kyouko-san took the next hour searching Unagi's 2LDK flat from corner to corner. The police had already gone through the place once, so she didn't come up with any new evidence, but Kyouko-san didn't seem particularly disappointed with her labor.

"As you said, there are no signs of anyone infiltrating through the windows... but this is quite a well-kept room. Quite tidied up for a man living alone... or could it be the police put things in order during the search?"

"No, we don't offer such a thorough service..."

He hadn't been too conscious of it up to the moment she mentioned it, but sure enough, Unagi's residence was prim and tidy. Rather than a detective's, perhaps this was a woman's viewpoint—though it was difficult to say that was relevant to the case.

"I don't know either. But maybe it wasn't Unagi-san, but the culprit who cleaned up."

"W-why would they do that?"

"If we knew that, we wouldn't need a detective."

With a warm smile, Kyouko-san sat herself down on the living room sofa. She carried herself gracefully as if it were her own room. Standing on his own wouldn't accomplish anything, so Officer Hijiori say across.

"I didn't find any notable evidence, but if you'll let me speak off of pure impression," Kyouko-san chose that timing to speak up, "Kujirai-san is guilty. Even subtracting the fact he was the first person on the scene, it's far too suspicious."

"Is that so... for example, it what regards?"

"He rung the intercom a number of times, and thinking it was strange there was no response, he went in with his spare key—that one's, well, sure, why not. For now, we'll put aside the question of why he carried the spare key around. But when the crime was reported and the police visited this room, you said Kujirai-san first took a peep through the door, and then undid the door chain after that... would your normally lock the chain in someone else's house?"

"Mn..."

"Rather, he wouldn't have locked the door in the first place—if there was a reason to lock it, then what could it be?"

"...Because he didn't want to be obstructed? Or because Kujirai-san was doing something in the room he felt guilty about—is that what it was? He was cleaning up after his work..."

"I can't think he had enough time to clean up the room as a whole, but... perhaps he could at least work some magic on the bathroom. To get rid of traces of murder, perhaps."

Though it's just a hypothesis, Kyouko-san remarked.

Sure enough, if at the present point they asked Kujirai why he fastened the door chain and he replied, 'I just felt like it,' there would be no means to pursue the matter further.

No matter ow many small questions and contradictions you piled up like in a mystery novel, the phrase 'I just felt like it' generally resolved most things in reality—that was something that didn't need a detective. That's why detectives had to pin down far more fundamental questions and contradictions.

"And no matter how suspicious he may be—no, despite how suspicious he may be, it is the basis of law that suspicious cannot be punished. If we're basing this on guilty until proven innocent, then even if my impression is guilty, as long as there is no physical evidence, I must conclude that Kujirai-san is innocent."

""

"Eh? Huh? Could it be that I've just forgotten, and the rationality and principal of law has changed just like the tax?"

"Oh no, perish the thought. Or at least, not that much."

But, and this was unbecoming of a police officer—but, with all the time he spent on the force, if that hadn't been a rationality and a principal, instead nothing more than a front, there would have been fewer times he found himself despairing at the world.

As a detective who, in a sense, operated in a domain even grayer than the police, he admired Kyouko-san who could say it so innocently—perhaps it was something only someone who, no matter how they despaired, would simply forget it could say.

It could be said that the forgetful detective unerringly embodied, 'hate the sin, not the sinner.'

"I apologize that I keep bringing up hypotheticals but, Officer. If Kujirai-san's alibi was established, where would you be around now? Meaning, if I weren't the forgetful detective, and I could properly testify to his alibi."

"In that case..."

It truly was a hypothetical, and not a talk Officer Hijiori could do anything about on his own, but even so, going by his own experience, he could express his view on the matter.

"He would quite likely be removed from the list of suspects. As long as his absence from the crime scene is proven, no matter how thick the suspicions are, he cannot be indicted—and there won't be an arrest warrant. Naturally, the one who testified to his alibi... meaning you would turn into Kujirai-san's accomplice, and we would have to conduct a careful investigation on whether or not you would give false testimony to cover for him..."

But in the case there was no reason to cover—even if he knew it was pointless, Hijiori had looked into it just in case, and had completely failed to find any connection between Okitegami Kyouko and the suspect Kujirai that went back further than the day before last. They really had met then for the first time, although even if that wasn't true, she's have forgotten.

"And if you're wondering what I'd be doing around now, I'd quite likely be searching for a separate culprit."

""

Hmm, upon hearing that, Kyouko-san folded her arms in thought—there was no way she actually felt responsibility at the fact the suspicions around a single suspect would clear had she been able to give testimony.

From Officer Hijiori's point of view, at this point, he couldn't help but feel something contrived about the alibi that had failed to be established—of course, in that regard as well, he couldn't punish a suspicion. Whether it was a rationality or a front or anything else.

But there, "Then how about we go apologize to Kujirai-san, who couldn't be removed from the list because of me," Kyouko-san came out with.

With—absolutely no apologetics showing on her face, she gave what was simply a mischievous grin.

8

In regards to the fact it had completely thrown off the police investigation and pushed it into a dead end, it was hard to say Kujirai's fabricated Alibi was a complete failure, but quite naturally, one would be hard pressed to say he was living with peace of mind. There was no way he could have anticipated that the person he chose to testify for him wouldn't remember it in the slightest—there weren't any means to anticipate that the occupation 'Forgetful Detective' even existed in the world, so he didn't even have any way to reflect on himself.

Good grief, the world sure is vast.

Considering how he hadn't been arrested, his alibi hadn't gone as far as to be disproven... but even if it still held water, as long as it was incomplete, his prospects of the future were slim. He had thought that, as long as the alibi was complete, no matter how suspicious he was, it would end as a suspicion...

As a change of pace, the day before, he had ordered whatever book she was reading over the net had it delivered within the day, and read it late into the night. Rather than a change of pace, perhaps he wanted to prove to himself that he really did meet that white-haired girl and talk to her two days prior—forget mystery novels, Kujirai wasn't accustomed to reading in general, so one short story was the most he could manage.

It was the one she had read that day, that she had called interesting and recommended to him, Sunaga Hirubee's 'Sentenced to Conversion'.

And quite a bizarre story it was.

The contents were greatly estranged from the image of mystery he had gleaned from the few mystery novels, drams and movies he had processed—While it was yet another field he lacked expertise in, so he couldn't say anything for certain, he got to thinking it was more of a sci-fi or fantasy story than a mystery.

Once upon a time, there was a heinous criminal—a true scoundrel, a natural-born villain. Not only every offense listed in the six codes of law, rumor had it he had committed every crime in the world.

The time had come for him to finally pay the piper.

He was arrested, prosecuted, and definitively guilty. He would naturally be punished with the greatest penalty the law had to offer—all those against the death sentence, and those who advocated for human rights, they all had no choice but to assent to his execution.

All besides one.

That person was a renowned psychologist, a surgeon, and a judge, a man who went by the name of Sorimine, and he declared that no matter how vile a villain, they should not be put to an end through the noose. If one had to be killed because they were a criminal, then they just had to not be a criminal any more—he said.

You just have to reform them.

Naturally, the villain was a villain to the core, and not the sort of man who would reform, but the reform Sorimine referred to was something a little different. You simply have to 'reshape the heart', he thought.

Suppressing the world's objections that he should just be killed this instant without all the tedium, Sorimine conducted the surgery.

And the villain was reborn.

He understood the feelings of others, believed in others, worked for others, allied himself with the honest, took the side of the weak,

never hurt a soul, and was modest and kind—he was reborn as a man of virtue.

And the released villain, now a Samaritan—

"Excuse me!"

Just as he had recalled the contents of the short story to that point, he heard a knock on his apartment's door and the voice of a woman.

It was an easy-going voice, so he couldn't help but carelessly open the door unwary, but awaiting him in the corridor were the scaryfaced Officer Hijiori, and the white-haired Kyouko-san he couldn't forget even if he was forgotten.

"Ah... err,"

He had to put his all into hiding his fluster... no, don't panic. Today those, umm, two subordinates who were still new at this weren't there. It didn't seem they had come with an arrest warrant to take him in.

More so, the fact that a key person in Kujirai's alibi, Kyouko-san, had come along meant it couldn't be such a pessimistic development—even if she'd forgotten, was she brought along on the off chance she might recall upon seeing his face? In that case, there was no need to be cold-hearted. To confirm his identity, he was far better off treating her with due courtesy.

"Officer, and... Kyouko-san, right? Do you have some business with me? A new development in the case?"

"No, we're still hard at work investigating... how is it?"

Officer Hijiori asked Kyouko-san—was this an identification after all?

"Yeaaah, looks like I really can't recall... I'm Okitegami Kyouko. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Kyouko-san said, lowering her head.

It had kinda seemed like bad joke up to that point. Until he had confronted her face to face, Kujirai couldn't believe it, but it did seem she really had forgotten the events of that day.

As if he were the sort of boring man who wasn't worth remembering, it made him ashamed to his heart, but that probably wasn't it—the forgetful detective's memory reset every day.

Please seduce me from scratch—should he have placed more weight on those words she gave at their parting? Should he have asked her what she meant? There's no way he could have figured it out back then.

"The name's Kujirai Ruka... it's not our first meeting, but it is a pleasure to meet you."

"Kujirai-san. Is there any mistaking the fact that the woman you talked to around three the day before yesterday was this person?"

"Yes, there is no doubt about it."

Kujirai answered as Officer Hijiori made doubly sure—well, Kujirai's one-sided memories wouldn't establish an alibi, but there was no way anyone would mistake such a peculiar woman.

"Kyouko-san, you really don't remember me?"

While he tried asking, for argument's sake, "Nope, not in the slightest," she refuted it stronger than necessary. "I'm sorry, Kujirai-san. I wish I was able to back up your alibi, but—oh, could you let me in?"

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"Pardon?"
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She asked quite naturally, so he accepted just as naturally, but asking to be let in because of the cold, come to think of it, was quite a brazen request. What's more, not only Kyouko-san, he ended up letting the police officer Hijiori in with her—that was a clear blunder.

It wasn't as if he had any suspicious articles in his room, so he didn't particularly mind, but he was beginning to realize that his pace was thrown off whenever this white-haired woman was around.

Rather than evading as slippery as an eel—it felt as if slippery as an eel, she was stepping around him. That was, in essence how she stepped in, anyway...

"Officer, would you like some coffee? Kyouko-san, you take your black, right?"

He casually mixed in the episode of their meeting two days prior as he procured some drinks—something must have been off as, during that whole time, Kyouko-san restlessly surveyed the inside of the room.

[&]quot;Please. It's cold outside."

[&]quot;Oh, sure... I don't mind."

[&]quot;Thank you."

"But that was a surprise. To think you were a detective."

"Did I not say so? Two days ago me?"

"The first I'm hearing of it. Aah, but you did say something about conducting inquiries..."

"Yes. I mainly conduct inquiries. I'm a detective, you see."

While he got the feeling she was being purposely misleading, the idea she was taking surveys was definitely Kujirai jumping to conclusions. Detective... based on that conversation the day before last, Kyouko-san definitely did seem to like mystery novels, so could it be she got the job out of fondness for the great detectives? In that case, she might be around the age where the gap between real and fictional detectives started getting to her.

Though she didn't seem bothered in the slightest...

Forgetful detective, eh.

"Kujirai-san, there are a few things I'd like to ask you. Could I go ahead?"

Once he had reached the low table with three drinks, the one who declared that to Kujirai wasn't Officer Hijiori but Kyouko-san.

"Mn... yeah, sure."

Once again, he carelessly accepted all too easily.

He hadn't let his guard down, but she had exquisite timing with each question.

"Could you explain the situation behind your discovery of the late Unagi-san's remains in detail?"

"I've already done that... to that officer."

"In detail. Word for word, not missing a single detail."

"""

While he wasn't up for it, he couldn't think up an appropriate reason to refuse—if he didn't want to show any more openings, it made it even harder to refuse her demand.

Kujirai- mostly honestly- described to the two the situation surrounding his discovery of the body. Perhaps it would disrupt the investigation even further, he thought as he explained more than what was demanded of him, not skipping a detail. Of course, he covered up the important point... but surely they didn't notice. They had no way of noticing.

"I see. To discover your dear friend has passed must be a terrible experience. You have my sympathies."

Kyouko-san said. While Kujirai was talking, she intently watched him all the way—as if rather than the contents of the story, she was paying more attention to the way he said it—and yet her impression at the end was something terribly mundane.

"Yeah, I was really nervous when I thought I'd see him again after so long..."

"When it was such a long-awaited reunion, you called out to me for tea right before that?" I'm really sorry for getting in the way—Kyouko-san said in a blank, innocent tone. Kujirai was startled. Even if he was making an alibi, that part was pushing it, even he thought so—it was inevitable, or rather, a choice between two evils, but for a young man such as himself to cut off a conversation with a young woman like Kyouko-san to see Unagi was...

Normally, he would have flaked out on a promise with a male friend to continue talking to Kyouko-san—not to mention Unagi wasn't even a friend anymore.

Even so, as long as he had a perfect alibi, he convinced himself that problems with his own M.O. wouldn't make for conspicuous flaws, but now with his alibi incomplete, nothing but the problems remained.

In the first place, at the point he called out to her as she read a book at the café, he would have been perfectly fine if she turned him down—if he incessantly latched onto a woman enjoying her coffee alone, it would leave an impression on her and the people around her, but contrary to his expectations, she conceded the seat all too easily, and the conversation bounded, so instead of a silver lining on a dark cloud, perhaps it was more of a dark lining on a white one.

"Oh no, don't worry about it. It's my fault for finding you so captivating I simply couldn't help but strike up conversation. Though when the conversation grew lively, I really grew pale when I finally remembered my promise with Unagi."

It was a bit painful, but he could only press on with that excuse. He had calculated that she wouldn't feel bad if he called her captivating, but Kyouko-san just smiled and ignored that part of it.

"But if instead of talking to me, you hurried to Unagi's apartment, you might have been able to prevent his accidental death."

"Nah, I wouldn't have made it in time. I heard he dropped the dryer right around the time I first talked to you."

With Kyouko-san's use of the term accidental death, he matched the story by reflex, but Officer Hijiori beside her made a grim expression. When the officer silently stationed himself with that scary face of his, it made Kujirai imagine all sorts of things on his own. Was this that 'good cop, bad cop' routine he'd heard about—no, Kyouko-san wasn't a cop... but she showered him with questions just like one.

"How long has it been since you last visited Unagi-san's apartment?"

"I couldn't tell you... it's been years. So long ago I can't remember. Is that important?"

"I'm just trying to crush every small question one at a time—it greatly hurts my heart that I was unable to testify for your alibi, so I thought I would try to clear up the suspicions placed on you."

"Uh-huh..."

"I'm a detective who specializes in inquiries, so if I could at least contribute the best I can."

" "

He would have been happy had that been the case, but at this point, no matter what beauty was saying it, Kujirai wasn't feeling gracious enough to take those words at face value. More than that, her questions for a while now had done nothing but solidify the suspicions on him.

"But phones, right... it's got to be cellphones these days."

He tried to measure out what she meant, but apparently, when she was surveying the room, she was confirming whether or not he had a landline. Perhaps she had already done the same at Unagi's house.

"When you rung the intercom a few times at the promised time, you found it strange he didn't answer and used a spare key to go in—correct?"

"That's true."

What about it? He was about to say when he swallowed his words—if he kept trying to probe into the meaning behind the questions, it would only make him more suspicious.

"Before you entered Unagi-san's room, why didn't you put in a call to Unagi-san's phone?"

" "

Crap, he thought, but whether that reached his expression or not—he hurriedly smoothed it over with, "Oh, you're right. It totally slipped my mind". As a matter of fact, entering Unagi's room without calling wasn't particularly strange for someone who owned a spare key. It was just the way she posed the question that made it practically seem like a decisive mistake.

If he was going to press the intercom button a few times when no one was looking, then even if he knew no one would answer, he should have called too... but that's all it was. Nothing more than something that honestly slipped his mind.

"Well, in the end, by that time, old Unagi was already dead."

"That's right. In the bathroom—however, Kujirai-san. What I really must ask is, how were you able to find Unagi-san's body?"

"...? How was I able to find it...? Err, I don't get what that means."

That one he really didn't know. It's not like Unagi's body was hidden in the ceiling or under the floorboards—he was in the bath, there wasn't even a lid on it. Even a five-year-old could spot that.

"No, no, that's not what I'm talking about. Don't humble yourself—I mean, normally, when searching for someone in an apartment, barely anyone searches the bathroom first. They'd normally check the living or dining room."

"Oh... that."

His gaze flitted to Officer Hijiori for a moment. The day before last, when he was first questioned, he had testified so—meaning, he said that as soon as he entered the room with the spare key, he immediately discovered the body in the bathroom. While he had determined he shouldn't tell any unnecessary lies... should he pretend to remember that he just didn't say it, and before the bathroom he checked the other rooms?

You might say there's no way to forget something like that, but there was, right before his eyes, the forgetful detective who couldn't back up his alibi. It might have some persuasive power. Still, even if he did say he investigated the living or dining room, that would lead to a peculiar development where his fingerprints wouldn't be found in either room—what a bog.

"Oh, it was just kinda happened. He didn't answer the door so I thought, hey, couldn't he be taking a bath or something? I had a hunch. In the past, when we still got a long, it had happened a few times... you can call him absentminded or slovenly, but he's the sorta guy that falls sound asleep in the bath."

It was true that he was the sort who fell asleep in the bath. The fact it had happened a few times before was a lie. But well, with how long ago that was, it would be hard for anyone to determine the authenticity of that claim.

"It was just coincidence that I checked the bathroom first, I doubt it will serve as any reference."

"It is the closest door to the entrance, after all."

"Yeah, there's that."

"Was it also often that Unagi-san took baths in the evening?"

"Well let's see. After exercising, he would hop in the bath without showering... I'm pretty sure he'd rather relax than clean up."

"I see, I see."

Sure she had accepted his explanation, Kujirai almost pat his chest in relief. Yet, "But in that case, it's even more curious," Kyouko-san swiftly leaned her body in.

"I mean, going off that train of thought, I get the feeling searching the bathroom's the first thing you'd give up on." "...?"

What did she mean? Was she trying to say calling out to someone in the bath was rude?

Perhaps if he was dealing with a woman, but when it was a man, and they were men the both of them, that retort was quite a stretch.

"No, no, what are you talking about, Kujirai-san? I mean, by that point, Unagi-san had dropped the dryer into the bath and been electrocuted to death."

"Y-yes, I know that now."

"Meaning—by that point in time, the room's breaker was tripped."

Even after she had said that much, it didn't hit home with Kujirai. So what if the breaker was tripped? Even if she brought that up, it wasn't particularly surprising to him. As a matter of fact, the electricity in the bathroom was off—off?

"... If the bathroom lights are off, you wouldn't usually conclude there's someone inside."

Officer Hijiori solemnly said—from what could be picked up from his reaction, he had just reached that realization himself.

"That bathroom didn't have any windows—if you're bathing without the lights, it'll be pitch black."

"""

"If it were me, even if I did suspect he was in the bath, at the moment I opened the dressing room door, I'd decide 'he's not here'. Even if I did search the bathroom after that, it would be after

looking at the living and dining room—and yet, you're saying you investigated the bathing area beyond that and discovered Unagisan, so you must boast a marvelous power of deduction. If it were me, then the moment I saw the pitch black hallway, I might have gone home."

"Y-you don't have to praise me like that, you're making me blush."

Her cynicism was palpable, but he could only answer as such and play it off with a laugh. Calm down, it's not like she's brought up some physically impossible contradiction, thought he. It's because he knew there was a corpse that he investigated the bathroom—she couldn't prove that.

"Maybe I heard old Unagi pleading for help. Maybe he guided me..."

He tried taking the conversation in a spiritual direction but, "Though you couldn't help him in the end," Kyouko-san simply, dryly cut that down.

"Aah, maybe you saw the cord? The dryer cord leading from the sink to the bath. And you got suspicious?"

Her theory sent out almost like a lifeboat almost made him hop right aboard, but both the changing area with the sink and the corridor were pitch black. Could he insist he saw the dryer's cord in that situation?

Of course, he did see it, so he should say that he saw it. Even if it was pitch black, that didn't mean it was perfect darkness. But even if that was the case, perhaps he could only make it out because he knew it was there beforehand—in that case, if he said he saw it here,

that slip-up might prove fatal. Kujirai cautiously answered, "I don't really know."

"Is that so. By the way, what did you do after you found Unagi-san's remains?"

"... Why of course, I immediately reported it. On my cellphone..."

"And then?"

"A-and then what?"

"Ah, no, it's fine if you didn't do anything—it is perfectly possible to lock and chain the door without any real reason."

She said with an unperturbed smile—while her words seemed to carry some profound meaning, Kujirai couldn't make out what that meaning was. He didn't know, but it was clear as day that continuing this conversation was bad.

It wasn't as if escaping here would change anything, but whatever the case, he had to break up the flow he'd been caught in.

"... I'm sorry, officer."

Kujirai ignored Kyouko-san to turn to Officer Hijiori.

"I have to go to the pool tonight, so I'd like to start packing up..."

"The pool... for your job?"

"No, I wish that were the case, but I can't neglect my training..."

It wasn't anything as exaggerated as training, but it was true he had plans to go swimming at the gym.

"Is that so? Then I apologize for keeping you so long."

Kyouko-san stood—and to Officer Hijiori who still seemed to have something to ask, "Then let's be off, officer," she said.

With a gentle smile, she turned to Kujirai.

"Pardon us, Kujirai-san. I'm glad I got to speak with you. I'll definitely prove your innocence, so rest at ease—as long as you're innocent."

"... Thank you. I'll be counting on you."

I may have entrusted my alibi to quite an outrageous person— Kujirai-san thought for the first time.

9

Upon leaving Kujirai's apartment, Officer Hijiori and Kyouko-san directed their feet towards an electronics retailer—it was in order to purchase a dryer. Kyouko-san insisted she wanted to buy the

exact same model as what had killed the victim, to confirm its length on-site. Officer Hijiori simply tagged along.

The way she grew somewhat unhinged at the novelty of the latest appliances was a refreshing sight to the officer, but (When her most recent knowledge was never updated, a visit to an electronics store was practically a visit to the future), whatever the case, when shopping was over and they had returned to Unagi's apartment, it was right around five in the afternoon.

Five in the afternoon—meaning the time Kujirai came upon Unagi's body two days prior. It wasn't as if they were aiming for that time, but it was most convenient to confirm the situation.

Entering the room, making for the bathroom with all the lights off—as Kyouko-san told Kujirai, it was pitch black. Having seen that, no one would think anyone was bathing inside.

"Hijiori-san. Please pass me the dryer.

"Oh, sure."

He took it out of the paper bag and undid the packaging. While he had tentatively kept the receipt, whether or not it fell under expenses was as of yet a mystery.

"Here. Do be careful."

"I appreciate the sentiment. But a dryer on its own can't be too dangerous... The bath's all dried up, anyway."

Kyouko-san said as she plugged the cord into the sink outlet and carried the dryer with her. Just like that, she softly placed it into the bathtub.

As expected, the cord just barely reached, but it didn't make it to the bottom of the tub—it precariously dangled over the side.

"Is this scene the same one you saw on the day in question."

"Yes... but by the look of things, the cord is going to lose to the weight of the dryer and unplug itself."

"When the tub's full, buoyancy will do its work, so I don't think that's a problem... but even if it reaches the bath, trying to dry your hair here is a tad... perhaps the shower area, but inside the bathtub is a tad pushing it—in the first place,"

With a tug, Kyouko-san yanked up the dangling dryer. She flipped the switch—a heated gale picked up, swaying her hair.

"Hmm,"

She assailed her own head with the dryer's breeze from all directions—as it wasn't wet to begin with, her white locks flashily hovered around.

After doing that a while, she slowly turned off the switch and returned to the changing area. For a while he had held his silence, but of course, Officer Hijiori couldn't grasp the meaning behind that action, "What were you doing? Testing the dryer's output?" he thought he should ask in jest.

"Why yes, that's exactly what I was doing," she replied with a nonchalant face. "Dryers these days sure have a high performance. It surprised me there."

"... Umm, Kyouko-san. I get that you're impressed with the advancement of technology, but look at the time..."

Officer Hijiori pointed at the watch on his wrist. While it was never good to rush, the forgetful detective had a time limit. Okitegami Kyouko whose memories were reset every day, it was impossible for her to investigate any case for greater than a one-day period. It was currently past five. It was too early to panic, but neither was it a time to play around.

"No, in short... officer, do you need this dryer?"

"? Ah, if you want to take that back with you after the investigation, then—"

"That's not what I meant. I'm asking whether you need this much functionality to dry your hair."

"That I do not."

He tried to be tactful but missed the mark—to play off his embarrassment, "I'm perfectly happy with a cheaper one myself," he answered the question. Of course, even that response was putting on airs to an extent, and when he did wash his hair, Officer Hijiori let it dry naturally instead of using a dryer, more often than not. While he might say things for appearance's sake, he wasn't one to care about appearances.

"Yes, even at my hair length, you wouldn't need this output—I'm thinking this is meant for women with long hair."

"... Oh."

Kyouko-san's white hair was bob cut at her shoulders. When even that hairstyle didn't need it, would an athlete, what's more, a swimmer like Unagi have any use?

From what he could recall from his corpse in the bath, it wasn't a buzz cut, but his hair was considerably short. He had, in some way or another, accepted the pairing of bathroom and dryer as natural, but—there were people in the world who didn't need a dryer at all.

If the need did arise, could he perhaps dry off with a thick bath towel?

"... Mn? Which means, what exactly does that mean?"

"I'm just considering possibilities. Of course, even if his hair was short, there are surely times he'd use a dryer, and perhaps there are oddballs out there who would use a dryer in the bathtub—but if, just like that, it is alright to take such outlying possibilities into consideration, then perhaps it is possible that the dryer that killed him did not belong to Unagi-san—right?"

"... You're saying it's a murder weapon carried in by the culprit? That because it was brought in for the express purpose of murder, they chose the highest possible output?"

That would make it material evidence. It wasn't that Unagi's personal belonging that happened to be there was used, it was the culprit's personal possession—even if that wasn't the case, if the culprit prepared it in advance...

"Yeaaaaah,"

Officer Hijiori was exhilarated, they had finally come upon a thin thread that might lead to the culprit. But the one who discovered it, Kyouko-san herself didn't seem too merry about the whole thing.

"W... what's wrong? Can't we trace Kujirai-san's recent movements to look into any traces of him buying a hair dryer...?"

That would be a door-to-door campaign, so it would no longer be an investigation that could end in a few days, but it could be said the forgetful detective had more than enough work already.

"Oh no, you see, how should I put it, I'm troubled over how I should express this feeling. Unagi-san used a dryer in the bath, and carelessly dropped the dryer, electrocuting himself—isn't that the story the culprit was trying to depict?"

"Indeed."

"The questionable points of this story are: the fact that someone exists who would use a dryer in the bathtub—something even a small child would know is dangerous, the fact that the dryer's cord is a little too short to use in the bath, and as I just brought up, the fact that Unagi-san, at the very least, probably did not need a dryer with an output this high—correct?"

"Yes. If you want to sum it up, that sounds about right."

That's why it's suspicious.

The fact that the case that at first looked like an accident started to be seen as a murder wasn't simply because the person who found the body was suspicious.

"But, hear me out. Even if someone—it doesn't have to be Kujiraisan, I'm trying to say that means that someone used the dryer as a murder weapon to kill Unagi-san."

"Yes. That's what I'm thinking right now."

"But that does not resolve a single one of the questions I just posed."

".....? Well yeah."

Well yeah, of course, he was about to retort when he arrived at that not-so-surprising fact. If the culprit intended to make this look like an accident on the part of the victim, they likely would have noticed those problems far before Kyouko-san, far before Officer Hijiori and resolved them accordingly.

"Are we wrong in the premise that this was supposed to look like an accident? Perhaps they only realized the cord length after arriving at the scene... and they didn't have an extension cord. One might have come up if they searched the living room, but there was the risk Unagi-san might get out of the bath while they searched..."

"If they didn't intend to make it look like an accident, they would have brought the dryer back with them... as demonstrated, it would become material evidence otherwise. But if there was an attempt to make it look like an accident, it would be strange to bring in a dryer the victim didn't usually use to begin with. Whether you look at it as an accident or a murder, it doesn't resolve any of the questions or contradictions surrounding Unagi-san's death."

"... But it's certain that Kujirai-san is suspicious, right?"

"That is correct."

Kyouko-san declared that one without any hesitation.

"The actions he took as the first on the scene can be summed up in the word shady—you could say that upon actually hearing him out, my suspicions have only grown deeper. While we glossed it over, his movements in this flat were quite clearly the movements of someone who knew Unagi-san was dead in the bathroom... and now that it's come to this, that matter with his alibi seems far too deliberate, or rather sly." "Sly."

"If hypothetically, I weren't the forgetful detective and his alibi was proven—is what I'm talking about. The time of death and the time he talked to me match up perfectly, don't you think that's too convenient?"

""

While 'the first person to find the body is suspicious' hadn't reached the realm of unwritten law, 'it is suspicious to have an alibi that's too perfect' was definitely an ironclad rule of detective novels.

"Meaning Kujirai-san talked to you in order to intentionally fabricate an alibi. Is that what you're saying."

"It does make sense to think of it that way. More sense than it being coincidence."

"But if you look at it that way, then in the end, Kujirai-san's alibi is pretty much established. That would be the same as accepting that at the estimated time of death, he was somewhere else talking to you."

"Yes. So there has to be some sort of trick, some scheme with the bathroom and the dryer, is how I see it..."

"A trick? Come to think of it, you did say something like that."

"Using the trick I'm thinking might be pushing it a bit, but it does explain why the murder weapon had to be a dryer... in short, I'm hypothesizing a timer."

"A timer?"

Kyouko-san nodded and explained her reasoning.

"Kujirai-san visited this apartment around noon on the day of the incident and knocked Unagi-san out through some means. Perhaps he used violence, perhaps he used drugs. He stripped him and put him in the bath. And putting a timer extension on the dryer, he left the place. He got a few stations away, got to the main street—and at three o' clock when the timer would activate, he made an unshakable alibi. If possible, someone who he was meeting for the first time, someone with a unique look that would be easy to find at a later date... for example, a young woman whose hair is all white. Choosing a time at his discretion, he'd wrap up the conversation and return here—in order to become the first on the scene. After confirming Unagi-san's died as planned, he reported it to the police and got rid of the timer before they could arrive. How does that sound?"

"... I don't see anything wrong with it."

It would explain why the first person on the body, Kujirai, had the door chain up when Officer Hijiori arrived.

"There's plenty of things wrong with it. From what I saw in the data, Unagi-san's body didn't have any physical injuries or any traces of sleeping drugs—even if you take away that viewpoint, there's no way to deny the possibility he might wake up while the culprit is away from the scene. A remote timer is far too uncertain as a means to kill."

"... Y-you do have a point."

"And what even is a remote timer?"

Hey, don't ask me, thought Hijiori. The idea hadn't even existed in his head before Kyouko-san presented it.

"If there's anything that can be salvaged from that nonsense deduction, it's the single point of the necessity of the dryer as the murder weapon. If the dryer's used as the weapon, then the breaker is sure to trip with Unagi-san's death, the definitive moment preserved on the time-shift machine among other devices—it's the perfect killing method to fabricate an alibi."

"That is a train of thought we haven't had yet, but... if that's the way we're going, it feels more like we're moving backward than forward."

To accept the existence of alibi fabrication and alibi tricks as a premise would paradoxically mean they would have to accept the premise of the suspect Kujirai's alibi being real—it did nothing but distance them from the resolution.

"What seemed like a simple accident gets more convoluted the more you think about it. At this rate, just what sort of new twists will this case show tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow... is it?"

"Ah, no, my apologies."

Kyouko-san only has today—it was bad manners to talk about tomorrow. However, without lending an eye to the officer's apology, she slowly began moving. She proceeded down the corridor, opening the door to the bedroom.

"Kyo-Kyouko-san?"

"I'm going to sleep."

"What?"

"I'm just going to take a bit of a nap. Officer Hijiori, please wake me up in an hour."

10

"Officer Hijiori, as you have pointed out, at present, we have a tendency to overthink things. We arbitrarily make the case convoluted, arbitrarily wandering into the labyrinth. So how about we go and press reset?"

She leisurely made the proposal. As if, to figure out where they had miscalculated, she was going to wipe the blackboard clean and recalculate everything from scratch.

No, it was true they were stuck at the moment, so Officer Hijiori was all up for resetting, but he'd have no trouble if he could do that—he was about to say when it occurred to him that the forgetful detective Kyouko-san could accomplish that with no trouble at all.

Kyouko-san only has today.

Her memory is reset every day—to explain it more precisely, once she sleeps at night and gets up in the morning, she'll have completely forgotten everything that happened yesterday.

To take that even further, the rule was no restricted to day and night. In short, as long as Kyouko-san slept and woke up, she would forget anything that happened before she slept—whether it was a short nap or siesta, the rule was strictly applied.

Meaning in this case, if she were to fall asleep for even an hour in Unagi's bedroom here and now, everything that happened that day—the series of events starting from the officer calling her to the police station, would have never happened at all.

It was like losing a ballpoint pen—however, unlike the missing pen, it could never be recovered later.

"But in that case, Kyouko-san, wouldn't you simultaneously be abdicating all the deductions we've piled up to this point?"

"Yes, that's why, that included I'd like to reset—it does seem the way I have gone at this case has been flawed from the get-go. When my entry point was as the very person meant to back up an alibi, there was no way I could handle the incident with a neutral stance. A detective should never be anything more than a third-party to the incident."

Kyouko-san said as she crudely patted against the cover and pillow Unagi used. She was checking whether the place was worthy enough for her to sleep. It did seem it got a pass, as after removing her glasses and placing them on the bedside, she flopped right down with flowing movements.

"Well then, good night, Officer Hijiori."

"Wait a second. You can't just sleep here—from your point of view, wouldn't you be being woken up in who knows where by a man you don't know? If I end up surprising you,"

Officer Hijiori knew himself well. He knew he had a tendency to put pressure on people—that was precisely why he used it to its maximum efficiency while investigating, but he wasn't suited to waking someone up. Even more so when he was dealing with the forgetful detective. In all actuality, it would be more than a surprise. "Oh my. You do have a point. Then,"

Kyouko-san got up for a moment, taking a thick magic marker from a nearby pen stand—and rolling up her sleeve, on her left arms, 'I am Okitegami Kyouko. White Hair. Detective. Currently investigating with Officer Hijiori,' she wrote.

A succinct message.

I see, then when she was woken up, she'd be able to reason it out easily—it was her own handwriting, she'd have a hard time suspecting it. For a moment, he thought she was going to write a summary of the incident as well, but Kyouko capped and returned the marker.

"When you wake me up, show me your police badge. That should get me to trust you", she said as she put herself to bed again.

"And give me an outline of the case—but cover up the fact I was meant to back up an alibi."

"Very well..."

It did seem she intended to thoroughly reset everything—but if that fact was to be covered up, weren't there other things he would have to hide as well.

"Yes, but going off of Kujirai-san's plan... instead of a plan, it could just be a coincidence, so how about we give him the luck of the draw. Meaning, just tell me that his alibi at three in the afternoon was backed up, make it so that he has a perfect alibi. The woman he met at the café terrace was able to testify without forgetting."

"... Telling lies isn't my forte, but I accept. Is there anything else I can do?"

"If I had to say, if you could buy us some dinner. For desert, an adzuki bar would be lovely."

And with that, Kyouko-san pulled over the covers and shut her eyes. She was already asleep a few seconds later—with a development so sudden, he had lost the chance to say good night on his end.

What was the best way to put it... he had always thought she boasted a brazen mentality unsuited to her soft, mature aura, but for her to actually fall asleep at a crime scene, in someone else's bed, that went beyond brazen into impudence.

You could call her a crazed daredevil—but rather than impressed, the officer had to wonder if, even if it were to reach the root of the case, did she really have to go so far?

Did Kyouko-san have some sort of circumstances that made her so thorough as a detective—to the end, nothing more than a mere client, Officer Hijiori couldn't tread in too deep.

All he could do was, at most, go out and buy dinner. Without forgetting the azuki bar, naturally.

11

"Oh I see. So that's what happened."

An hour later.

Woken by Officer Hijiori, the Kyouko-san who opened her eyes naturally—by her own devices—had completely forgotten the conduct of 'Yesterday's Kyouko-san', and was understandably somewhat distraught.

But she immediately looked at her handwritten message on her left arm, and upon seeing the officer's badge, with her own insight, she grasped the situation—eating the convenience store bento bought while she was out, Hijiori gave an outline of the case. Just as he thought she didn't have any input, at the very end, she said that with a satisfied nod.

"So what do you see?"

He had given a false explanation for Kujirai's alibi, so when she said 'I see,' it made him feel like he was tricking her... but at the very least, it was Kyouko-san who chose to be deceived for the time being, and he simply did what he was told.

"When I said I see, I mean I get the general idea. While a few points remain that I must confirm with the man himself... the supposed alibi trick set up in the bathroom, the true nature of the alibi fabrication Kujirai schemed, I've roughly worked it out."

He was shocked.

This was an attitude brimming with self-confidence, unimaginable only a short hour ago.

"This is quite rudimentary, officer."

"I-I see..."

Kyouko-san, who'd been just as stuck as he was not too long ago was starting to speak like a fictional great detective—well, it was nothing to retort at.

"Do you mean... a remote timer device?"

"Remote timer? Did I describe it like that? Hmm... well, it's nothing so overblown, but you could call it a fitting depiction. I give myself passing marks."

""

Having escaped the labyrinth of thinking too hard, Kyouko-san's leisure was palpable—she was condescending over her own past self. In the first place, Officer Hijiori who was still trapped in the labyrinth could only say he was struggling to understand this confidence.

"... Then you're telling me you have already seen through to the truth of this case."

Not thirty minutes had gone by since she opened her eyes in the bedroom. No, even including from when he had called her to the station in the morning, it hadn't even been twelve hours—and yet, she had ascertained the truth.

The fastest detective.

Who solves any case in a day—

"Oh no, you think far too highly of me. As things stand, a deduction is no more than a deduction. It's not like I have any definitive proof."

"Strictly speaking, what sort of trick do you foresee that he used? How did Kujirai-san construct an alibi?"

"I didn't get there by a path I can brag about. It's just seeing what works—no, a leap in thought perhaps."

"…?"

"If I had to say, it's because the suspect Kujirai-san and the victim Unagi-san are both swimmers. That's why I thought it might be the case."

What she had to say made it even less comprehensible—Kyouko-san likely didn't want to carelessly say anything uncertain to an agent of the law, and she wasn't trying to put on airs with her mystery solving, but it ended up making him impatient.

So what if both Kujirai and Unagi were swimmers—he did tell yesterday's Kyouko-san how ironic it was that a professional swimmer died in the bath.

"As I said, there are a few points I still have to verify with the man himself... those holes really can't be filled in by deductive reasoning. Where is Kujirai-san right now?"

Kyouko-san asked, pulling the adzuki bar out of its packaging and swiftly biting down on it.

"Err... he did say he planned to swim at the pool tonight. Something about training... it did sound like an excuse to cut off the

questioning, but I doubt it was a complete lie. And so, should we try asking him tomorrow morning or so?"

"I don't have any reason to wait until tomorrow morning—I'll have forgotten the reasoning I finally reached. Officer Hijiori, I do apologize for dragging you around on my whims, but I have one final request."

"What could it be? Of course, come so far, I'm up for anything. Say what you will."

"Thank you. I hoped you would say that. Well then,"

Said Kyouko-san.

"I'm going to buy a swimsuit, won't you accompany me?"

12

Kujirai swam—he wasn't counting how many laps he had already made around the fifty-meter pool. Ignoring pacing and his muscles' limits, he devoted himself solely to paddling the water in a crawl.

Swimming was simply his passion, that hadn't changed even now that he'd retired from active duty. His fondness came from the fact he didn't have to think anything unnecessary while he was swimming, but today alone, no matter how long he swam, he always ended up thinking.

He thought. About his old friend Unagi—and about the whitehaired detective.

While he had succeeded in driving the officer and detective away for the day, it wouldn't go so well tomorrow—and there was no doubt it would be even more difficult the day after that. While her mouth said something about proving his innocence, everything else about that detective clearly held him in doubt.

At this rate, he could see the situation becoming poorer and poorer.

But be that as it may, Kujirai had no cards to play—from the start, he had constructed nothing but an alibi, and he had no intentions to cover anything up beyond that. By the point he failed to make a perfect alibi—the point he had to choose the forgetful detective of all people to testify, he had made a critical mistake.

Then what should he do? He swam as he thought—he thought in the time he wasn't supposed to think anything. And he immediately reached his conclusion.

I should run.

Throw everything away and run—for honor.

If he ran, the suspicions might increase, but now wasn't the time for such rational thoughts—if more seams came out the more he talked, he simply had to reject interaction itself.

Now that it had come to this, he grew thankful of his own present situation where he was practically unemployed—alright, I don't have to wait for tomorrow's sun to rise, I'll pack up as soon as I get back, and go on a journey. Overseas, while I'm at it. I've gone to enough meets, back when I competed, I can speak my share of English.

Once he had decided it in his heart, he had actually begun to long for that life on the run—and that's why, after that, he no longer had to think anything as he swam.

It was all gone and done. But even so, he was a step behind—no, a stroke behind. Perhaps he never should have given up thought—he should have stopped swimming along the way and left the pool already.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Kujirai-san."

As he had finished his course and was about to climb out of the pool, what awaited him was someone whose impression had changed without their glasses, but be that as it may, there was no way he could mistake them. Wearing a one-piece swimsuit so white it was

dazzling, yet her hair even whiter, the forgetful detective—Okitegami Kyouko.

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It's a pleasure to meet you, she said.

Meaning—her memories had been reset again. While Kujirai had no way of knowing the forgetful detective's specific rule or regulations behind her forgetting, the eyes of someone looking at someone for the first time in their life were something he could pick up on instinct.

He had tried to reset his thoughts through devoting himself to swimming but—this forgetful detective was able to do it simply by forgetting. Is there anything I can win at? He insulted himself.

Though it seemed Officer Hijiori wasn't with her...

"Could I have a bit of your time?"

As Kyouko-san asked with a smile, he felt a sense of déjà vu—this was almost the exact opposite of the café from two days prior. She was wearing a cute one piece, but had she invited him wearing something with higher exposure, he felt he might immediately accept. Albeit, a former competitive swimmer like Kujirai wasn't that impulsive.

"I'm sorry, I'm in the middle of training at the moment."

"Oh? Don't' be so cold. Weren't you just about wrapping up? You've been swimming for quite a long while..."

A long while, had she been watching?

Kujirai played dumb, "I'm just taking an interval," he said and returned to the pool.

"I can wait until you've done another fifty laps."

Of course, there was no way he could do another fifty—going beyond indirect to the point of blatant rejection, Kujirai pulled down his goggled and kicked the wall of the pool.

It happened at that moment.

Splash, Kyouko-san jumped into the lane one over—An active action one wouldn't expect from her gentle appearance.

In the first place, the very fact she dropped by the fool made it feel like she got the drop on him—her movements were all terribly speedy, or rather, she was quick to react.

"... If you suddenly jump in without preparing yourself, you can induce a heart attack,"

Giving a warning as an instructor was the most Kujirai could do.

"Ahaha. A heart attack, is it—so it's like an electric shock?"

""

"No need to worry. I've already done my warmup—hey, Kujirai-san."

Equipping the swimming cap and goggles she had hung on the shoulder string of her swimsuit, Kyouko-san went on.

"How about we have a little competition? Fifty meters, freestyle. If I reach the goal first, you'll have to spare me just five minutes or your time."

"... You're a forceful one. Are you one of those aggressive types?"

"I'm a detective type."

"That so."

If you just started out with that—he did think, but hindsight was twenty-twenty and it was already too late.

"Then if I win, Kyouko-san, will you go on a date with me?"

"I don't mind. I do like dates."

Kyouko-san readily accepted Kujirai's inciting words.

With that reply, there was no turning back.

"Then it's a match."

Kyouko turned forward and prepared herself.

Judging by that action alone, she wasn't a complete amateur... perhaps she could swim faster than the average man. Of course, Kujirai didn't believe she could swim faster than a former professional.

Be that as it may, there was no way she made such a reckless challenge with no hopes of victory... she said she watched him swim a while, so did she think he was tired out? Well of course, he was swimming without calculation so he couldn't go at full power, but that didn't mean he didn't have another fifty meters left in him.

"Ready, start!"

Kyouko gave the signal herself and kicked the wall—with no prior notice, she had arbitrarily made her start but he didn't' mind giving her a bit of a handicap.

Following behind, Kujirai took in a deep breath, and kicked—with the same crawl as before, he began to swim.

He didn't think anything as he swam.

But he felt.

It was somewhat irregular, but he couldn't help but feel it had been a truly long time since he competed with someone like this—and he began to detest himself for enjoying it. In his active days, he had frequently gone up against Unagi just like this. He didn't know what he was supposed to feel about that.

There was no mistaking the sole fact he would never be able to swim with him again—but as he swam on, he stopped feeling that as well.

"Buhah!"

When he popped his head out o the water to take a breath, he looked at the lane over. He must have passed her long ago—but Kyouko-san was nowhere to be seen.

It was only an instant and he was wearing goggles, so perhaps he simply didn't see her, but she wasn't there swimming on the second breath either.

Don't tell me, she drowned? Did she force her body to win the race and get a leg cramp—or was it really heart attack?

"... Kyo- Kyouko-san!?"

Kujirai halted his crawl to get his face out of the water. He looked around—where had she sunk?

He had to save her fast... this pool was a deep one, and her feet most likely wouldn't reach the bottom at her height. What was the lifeguard doing?

Kujirai had flown into a panic, and Kyouko-san had for all intents and purposes sunk to the bottom of the pool. To be more precise, she had dived there. Dived, and swam.

"I win!"

She appeared from the water with that cry—as she touched the wall of the course. Still in the center of the lane he'd been standing, Kujirai could only watch as it happened.

With such a great difference between them, he had lost...

"No... it's against the rules to go underwater in freestyle."

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"What a peculiar rule. If you wanted to swim faster, more nimbly, it would be more appropriate to sink your entire body under the water's surface and dive, and yet, to think it would be forbidden by the rules... don't you find that inefficient."

Kyouko-san said without any shame—seeing how she did whatever it took to win, it was on the contrary, even a little heroic, yet at the same time terribly idiotic.

And sure enough, as she said, the fastest way to swim was underwater—following the rules to always keep one portion of your body above water would just increase resistance.

Taking off her swim cap and refastening it in her shoulder string, wiping off her white hair that had taken on a silverfish hue with a towel, "I assume it's because swimming is an event meant to draw a crowd—if all the competitors crawled along the bottom of the pool, you wouldn't be able to cheer for them, and there would be no excitement,"

Kyouko-san said—the conversation took place on a poolside bench. Kujirai made his resolve to sit beside her. To be able to sit next to a beauty in a swimsuit was truly an honored event. If not a crowd, it had at least drawn him.

"Not limited to swimming, I've thought the same about track and field events as well. Running in circles, crossing complicated courses, that's quite a bit of loss, isn't it? If you truly wanted to see who's fastest, then even if it is forty two point one nine five kilometers, just like the hundred meter dash, it should be measured in a straight line course."

"... Preparing a course like that is impossible. Humans are only able to do what they can in the scope they've been given."

"You're right about that... oh, that's actually quite nice."

"Pardon?"

He wondered what was nice, but that conversation was already over. Kyouko-san pointed at Kujirai's head—his soaked hair. While it was still wet, he had a short cut that didn't even need a towel.

"I always wanted to try cutting my hair really short once in my life, but I can never make the resolve... if I woke up one morning, and my hair was suddenly so short, tomorrow's me would be terribly surprised and jolly about it."

"... I'm sure any hairstyle would work. If it was on you, Kyouko-san."

"You sure know how to compliment,"

Kyouko-san smiled.

While that part about any hairstyle suiting her was Kujirai's complete honest impression, he also honestly felt her silver glistening hair was strangely sexy. The gap with her innocent expression caused her heart to skip a beat.

"Fufu,"

Kyouko-san draped the towel she used to wipe her hair over her shoulders.

"Well, unlike you and Unagi-san, I don't swim so frequently, so it doesn't matter. I haven't smelled so much chlorine in a while."

"Chlorine... I've gotten quite used to the smell, but as a woman, are you worried it might damage your hair?"

"I'm not really bothered by it. I don't think you can damage my hair any further."

She said quite indifferently.

Was that a delicate matter or not? He couldn't decide so he decided to ignore it. It was hard to imagine any link between white hair and forgetting.

"So, Kujirai-san. May I begin the conversation? You did promise you would give me five minutes of your time."

"Yeah... I'll keep the promise."

He said, taking note of the minute hand of the clock by the poolside. It was normally used as a reference for swim time—now it would serve a separate function.

"But can I ask one thing before that?"

"I don't mind. What could it be?"

"I'm sure you've already forgotten, but when I first met you, there was a book you recommended me. A short story called 'Sentenced to Conversion' by an author called Sunaga Hirubee..."

"Oh, I'd surely recommend that one. It's a lovely story I've read far too many times—did you read it?"

"Just the one."

"I'm glad. Even between readers, it isn't often you actually get someone to read a book you recommend."

Is that how it works? Certainly, Kujirai had largely read the short story just to back his own alibi...

"And now that you've read it, how was it?"

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask about. The villain is reformed... he's made to reform, and when I thought that was the end, it kept going."

It was, how to put it, a terrible punchline.

More surreal than bad.

After that, the once-villain Samaritan would trust people only to be scammed, save people only to shoulder their debt, get alone only to be betrayed; with his own sense of values grounded in virtue, he despairs at the discrepancy with the world, at the end his heart and body in tatters, he dies a dog's death.

The sentence to conversion was, in short, that sort of sentence—by reforming a villain, he was sentenced to go through all the tragedy of a man of virtue.

A sentence far crueler than death.

... He thought it was an outrageous story. Upon reading it, just what sort of lesson was the reader supposed to take?

"Having a vile criminal go through something terrible is something I can understand in a book on morality, but in this one, the point is

we're supposed to accept the premise that it's a virtuous man having all the terrible things done to him. The basis of the punishment is to make the villain go through hell by turning him into a good man... that one just doesn't sit well with me."

Just what am I supposed to feel?

It just didn't sit right—that's why, now that he had the opportunity, he wanted to try asking Kyouko-san.

Though he missed his timing at midday...

"You're surprisingly, oh, I don't mean this in any bad way, but you're too earnest, Kujirai-san."

Kyouko-san said with a peculiar laugh—when she reacted like that, it felt as if he had said something that terribly missed the mark. Was talking about that now missing the mark as well?

"No, I'm just not accustomed to reading. Mystery novels especially. That's why I didn't know how I was supposed to take a story like that."

"People who are accustomed to reading can wander off on similar detours as well. I'm no exception—but Kujirai-san. To read a book and then see what moral lesson to take, what to learn, how to use it later in life, you don't have to set yourself up like that. We're not in Japanese class."

Kyouko-san stuck up one finger towards Kujirai. While that was a gesture like a Japanese teacher, actually mentioning that was a statement unbecoming his profession.

"Well now, there's someone out there with some crazy ideas. That's all you've got to think when you close the book."

""

"Then let's start the mystery solving. Don't worry, I'll properly end it in five minutes—rationally and quickly."

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"Kujirai-san, two days ago at three in the afternoon, you spoke with a certain woman at a café terrace—the two of you enjoyed tea together, and enjoyed your time for a little under an hour."

""

A certain woman, what a strangely roundabout way to put it—she was the forgetful detective, but even if she forgot every day, he didn't understand why she had to go so far to express it at someone else's business.

"And miraculously, it was at that very same time that your oncerival Unagi-san is estimated to have died—meaning you have an alibi."

"That's great. I'm glad to hear that."

He replied for what it was worth. Did he come off as sarcastic?

Kyouko-san's alibi testimony was practically invalid, making it so he might as well not have a proof of absence from the scene... did they take testimony from the barista or some other customer?

"But for your alibi to match up so perfectly feels a little too contrived for coincidence. As someone who had discord with the victim, and the first person to stumble upon the body—"

"Don't you think there are just some coincidences out there? Like the miracle of me meeting you?"

Just as a test run, he tried that evasive line but, "Certainly, there might be. But there might not be as well." He was evaded in turn.

"Whatever the case, when someone has an alibi, it is a detective's nature to want to crumble it—the more perfect that alibi is, the more I feel like taking it down."

"Now that's quite a nature..."

More than a nature, it was an occupation.

If he knew he would be getting involved with this sort of character, Kujirai likely would never have tried to make a perfect alibi—of course, it was he who dragged such a character into the case, so he had no one to complain to.

Though the reason Kyouko-san continued speaking as if Kujirai had a perfect alibi remained a mystery...

"And so? Did you destroy my alibi?"

"In this instance, there are a number of ways to think about it. First, your alibi at three in the afternoon was a falsehood. Second, the time of death is wrong."

"... Well that sounds logical."

More all-encompassing than logical, really.

To crush every conceivable possibility one at a time—detective was a far plainer job than Kujirai had anticipated.

"So which one is it?"

"It's neither. That approach will not be able to crumble your alibi. So there, a final possibility arises—meaning, if your proof of absence is real, and the time of death is real, I can only think that Unagi-san lost his life to what one might call a remote timer."

Normally, he wouldn't have any problem if she thought the culprit was someone apart from him, but... a remote timer?

"Are we getting high tech here?"

"That's how yesterday's me described it... but that aside... there was a timer mechanism in that bathroom, and when that mechanism was set off you were somewhere else making an alibi. That's one way I can destroy your alibi—more than destroy, I would be rendering it meaningless."

"Do you really want to make me out as the culprit that badly? Rather than pursuing that possibility, I think it would be far faster to search for another suspect."

He tried saying cynically, but Kyouko-san didn't seem hurt in the slightest.

"I have nothing against you not being the culprit. And just because you don't have an alibi, that doesn't mean you're the culprit."

" "

When she said that with a smile, it was hard to refute any further.

One of the reasons Kujirai found it hard to read mystery novels was because he couldn't understand why someone who committed a crime would obediently listen to a detective's reasoning, but once he was actually standing in that position, it was surprisingly charming. To have his own actions analyzed and critiqued.

And so, from his own side, "So what was the remote timer" he urged Kyouko-san on.

"Are you saying I built up a Rube Goldberg and set it up to drop the dryer in the bath at the designated time? And I became the first person on the scene in order to collect that device?"

Not only did he urge her, he tried leading her astray, but the detective didn't hop on board.

"No, I highly doubt that. The more complex the mechanism is, the more evidence will remain. Even if it were to create an alibi, it's not clever to increase material evidence towards that means—though I do think that's roughly the reason you became the first on the body.

Otherwise, there would be no reason for you to go out of your way to discover the corpse."

A simpler mechanism is best, Kyouko-san said.

"Since I said remote timer, it looks like you imagined some convoluted trick, but it didn't need any unnecessary tools. The dryer that took Unagi-san's life. That was enough."

"... Did the dryer have a timer function? Hair dryers these days come with all sorts of bells and whistles. Though I don't use them, so I'm not too knowledgeable."

"Right, that might be the case for a man with short hair like you—and Unagi-san too, of course. Did Unagi-san usually use a dryer, by the way?"

"Who knows... unlike me, he was a dandy dude who liked putting on airs, so perhaps he did."

As Kujirai shrugged his shoulder to play it off "The murder weapon dryer had no timer function," Kyouko-san replied with a straight face.

"Rather, it wasn't necessary. The dryer just had to have the highest output as possible."

"Then another mechanism would be needed after all. Something to drop the dryer in the water when three in the afternoon came around—"

"It was unnecessary," Kyouko-san emphasized. "No need for setup, or even for it to fall into the tub. The reason being, the dryer was in the bathtub from the start."

"The bathtub, from the start? Hey now, what are you saying... if a high output dryer hit the bathwater, it would spark at that very instant. I can't see a trick."

"At first, I considered the possibility of pure water."

"Pure... water?"

"Yes."

Kyouko-san said as she pointed at the pool.

"The water in the pool is mixed with chlorine, right? Pure water is the opposite—meaning water with no impurities mixed in. Water in that state despite being molecular H2O does not conduct any electricity. If the water in the bath was pure water, even with the dryer in it, it wouldn't spark."

"... Then the dryer was on in the bathwater the whole time?"

"Not all of it. Once the pure water lost its pure state, at that instant it would quite likely spark."

"Meaning... it would be the sort of timer you were talking about. Are you saying I predicted the state change of pure water? That someone without any scientific knowledge like me could predict it would pass current in an hour?"

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying at all... I'm just trying to bring up how I was considering quite an idiotic possibility at first. Even a detective couldn't read the state change of pure water through passage of time—I'm sure what the bathtub filled with was just bath water."

"Most likely."

"Rather, couldn't it be that it didn't have any water to begin with?"

After presenting a completely absurd hypothesis, she cut into the main issue—it seemed that was the forgetful detective's way of doing things.

"The dryer was simply dangling in an empty bathtub. After that, the bath's faucet was turned on—not completely, just a little. And bit by bit, the bathtub filled with water—the moment the rising water touched the dangling dryer,"

It sparked.

Kyouko-san declared.

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"Using the tub's volume and the flow from the tap to work out the time it takes to fill is an elementary school arithmetic. Kujirai-san, the action you had to take as the first person on the body, what you had to do while you waited for the police to arrive—was to tighten the handle on the faucet."

Of course, there were other finer details you had to take care off as well—said Kyouko-san.

"And that is the reason you had to be the first person on the scene."

"... Are you being serious, Kyouko-san?"

"Very serious."

Kyouko-san calmly replied.

"Or was there some flaw in my deduction? Something you'd like to object to?"

"Yes, of course, there is."

While he said that, Kujirai had already given up. This was nothing more than a rebuttal of courtesy. It was pretty much like throwing Kyouko-san a bone so she could explain it easier.

"First off, would the dryer's weight let it dangle in an empty bathtub? Wouldn't it unplug itself all on its own? All the more if it were on.

Secondly, are you saying the victim Unagi didn't notice such a contraption? He silently watched on as a high output dryer was dangling right before his eyes? Thirdly, in the first place, what was he even doing, bathing in an empty bathtub?"

"Okay, okay, okay,"

Kyouko-san faithfully nodded at every point—it looked like she intended to answer them all together. So Kujirai decided to bring out the most fundamental question at the end.

"Fourth. As you said before. Even if such a trick was set up—there is no evidence that I am the culprit."

It may destroy his alibi, but from the start, it was an alibi that was far from perfect.

"Even if, as the first person there, I turned off the water that was left dripping, I may just have done it because I 'felt like it' correct? Even without a certain reason or necessity, if you see a faucet that's been left on, isn't the normal response to turn it off?"

"You're right about that. I can't stand slovenliness myself."

"Then..."

"You seem to be misunderstanding, but I never said a word about you being the culprit who killed Unagi-san."

"Huh?"

She-hadn't. Not a word.

"I simply saw an alibi so I wanted to break it—though it's true that it all leads in from there. I meant it when I said not having an alibi

doesn't guarantee you're the culprit, and I'd like it if you take that at face value. However—as you have so courteously pointed out, this alibi trick is a little forced. I see, while it's a simple and well-put-together timer device, it is far too naïve of a method of murder. If you wanted to kill someone with this means, you would have to reinforce the plug so it doesn't fall out, what's more, you would need to take Unagi-san's consciousness away before restraining him in the bathtub."

"... Like tying him up or drugging him?"

"Even then, he could just kick the dryer out. Unless you bound him quite firmly, the trick would never work out. And even if, not restricted to drugs, Unagi-san was incapacitated by some means."

Kyouko-san made the shape of a pistol with her fingers—no, she was more likely miming the hair dryer.

"With its high output, that dryer makes a great deal of noise. If he was sleeping deep enough that he didn't wake with that rumbling right next to him, it would have left some trace on his remains"

No bruises from rope, no traces of drugs, nothing at all—Kyoukosan pointed out.

"In general, using this method just to make an alibi is plain idiotic. If you want to make it work out, that just increases the number of tricks you have to use, and while you may be able to kill someone, the possibility the alibi doesn't work out is far too great."

She declared.

As a matter of fact, Kujirai's alibi went unconfirmed... though that was for a completely separate reason. And that aside,

"Kyouko-san, that's one minute down."

As Kujirai said that, pointing at the poolside clock, "That's plenty," Kyouko-san replied with a composed smile.

"It's plain idiotic to kill someone like that—but thinking of it as an accidental death is just as idiotic. It's far too unnatural for the short-haired Unagi-san to use a short-corded hairdryer in the bathtub. Even a grade schooler should know how dangerous that is—the noble Officer Hijiori thought this at first. Trying to dry your hair in the bath is suicidal."

""

"Suicidal... yes, that's right. Unagi-san's death was suicide, Kujirai-san—as I'm sure you're aware."

"Suicide... when you look at it that way, it all fits into place. At the very least, it would resolve all the questions you brought up. If, on his own will, he waited in an empty bathtub for the water to rise, there would be no need for restraints or drugs. The sound of the dryer he had to endure on his own will—and to make sure the dryer didn't unplug itself on its own, he held it in his own hand and supported it up."

While that would leave fingerprints, they were his own prints. They wouldn't be a problem—Kyouko-san finally folded up her fingers she had kept in the shape of the hairdryer.

"Meaning the dryer was a timer and an auxiliary device to a suicide. What you did as the first person on the scene was clean up his mess—perhaps? The reason Unagi-san had been talking with you on the phone lately was because he was pleading for you to do it."

"... Your ideas are so out there I'm struggling to keep up. Why would an Olympic candidate with a promising future commit suicide?"

"For a man living alone, his room was strangely orderly. You'll have to excuse me if I saw that as him preparing for a journey beyond."

Kyouko-san said.

"Did the money disappear as his payment to you?"

She asked. The fact that question came up meant even this forgetful detective didn't have an understanding of everything.

"I don't know about that. Perhaps he went a little wild, or took to donating so he didn't have any regrets at the end."

"Is that so. Well, that sounds about right."

He really didn't know about the money's whereabouts, so he answered a little haphazardly and Kyouko-san easily pulled back. While he found it a little doubtful, "I don't think you're the type of person who'd do it for money," she added on.

"You sound like you know me."

"As well as I ever will."

"If Unagi committed suicide, then why did I have to be so desperate to make an alibi? Don't you think I needed an alibi because I killed the guy?"

"The reason you needed to fabricate an alibi wasn't because you killed him, but because you would be suspected. You would be stumbling upon the remains of Unagi-san, who you already didn't get along with—an alibi would definitely be necessary. It was precisely because you weren't the culprit that you needed someone to prove it."

"... Just hypothetically. If there was such an arrangement between me and Unagi. Let's say he suddenly called me out of the blue and, 'Hey, I've decided to die this time. So when I die, you'd better have a proper alibi' he kindly warned me."

"Well I'm sure he did. Probably word for word."

He was being cynical but it didn't get across.

Despite how calm she looked, she was considerably firm.

"And then after that, I'm sure he told you, 'There's something I need you to help me out with' or something. He needed you to finish up the crime scene."

"It might look consistent, but isn't that strange? In that case, the contraption was unnecessary. Instead of doing something as roundabout as letting the water in bit by bit, he just had to dunk the dryer in at the designated time. Doesn't the use of that trick equal the conclusion that this case was a murder incident?"

"Not equal, nearly equal."

"N-nearly?"

"I'm saying it was Unagi-san's goal to make it seem that way. A dryer he didn't usually use would leave too many questions for an accidental death. It was suicide pretending to be murder. Without leaving a will—and he asked you to take care of the scene."

Unagi-san didn't want anyone to think he had committed suicide, Kyouko-san said in a meek tone as if she had some thoughts of her own on the matter.

"Because, just as you said, he was an Olympic candidate with a promising career—I'm sure he didn't want the world to see the weakness in his heart that led him to suicide."

"... I'm envious of you, Kyouko-san."

"Huh"

"I said I'm envious that you can so easily declare suicide as a weakness of the heart. Kyouko-san."

It's impossible for me, he said.

Because I saw the bottom before.

He had no drive to blame the detective, and he was mostly just taking out his resentment—but Kujirai had no choice but to say it.

"To swim, crawling at the bottom of the pool is impossible for me."

Her mood unhindered, "And it's precisely because it's impossible for you—that Unagi-san cast away his grudges to make the request to you." Kyouko-san smiled.

"Turn off the faucet for me—as if he was asking a friend."

"... There's just one thing you're wrong about."

Kujirai stood from the bench as he spoke. It was a trivial matter, and perhaps he shouldn't say it, but it felt itchy for her to put it as if he and Unagi still understood one another, and unable to bear it any longer, he could no longer stay silent.

"What he asked me to do wasn't just the faucet—if I had to say, that was just a side thing."

"A side thing? Then what was the main?"

"Have you seen a photo of Unagi's body?"

Kyouko-san shook her head.

Even if she had, perhaps she had forgotten.

"Then you should have a look. You'll see he went off with a peaceful look on his face—a dying face so pretty, you'd never believe he was electrocuted. Of course, because I put it in order for him."

While he said put it in order, all he really did was close his bulging eyes, and similarly close his mouth, but... that alone changed the impression he gave off quite a bit.

"What did I tell you? He's a dandy dude who's all about acting cool. He was even worried about his reputation after he died—that was the part of him I could never stand."

"... You can't call that efficient."

But, Kyouko-san said,

"But a swimmer is a job all about drawing a crowd—I'm sure it's important how people see you."

"Kyouko-san, what is my crime? Defiling the dead... is it?"

"Who knows? I'm dull on law. I only know the concept and principles."

"Is that really alright for a detective?"

"Even if I learn it, I'll forget it. All you can really count on me for is a good old sense of values."

Kyouko-san said before standing herself.

"If you made the corpse more presentable, that's pretty far from defiling—it's dubious whether you can be taken in for assisted suicide either. All you did was know and fail to stop him... stopping the water could be called destruction of evidence, so please consult with Officer Hijiori on that one. I doubt he'll do you ill."

"That's a huge help... Hey, Kyouko-san."

Kujirai looked at the clock—five minutes on the dot. He had nothing left he wanted to ask or talk about, and in that case, ending the conversation here was the smart way to go.

But just one more thing, it was overtime, he made the excuse as he decided he would pose the question to the detective in a swimsuit.

"Back there, I was being critical of you, but... it's not like I properly understand how Unagi felt either. It's not like I can accept the fact he took his own life—I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about this... should I sum up this conclusion with, 'some guy out there has some crazy ideas' as well?"

"You can't. Because this is reality."

Please mull over it forever.

Kyouko-san told him flatly, no mercy to spare.

"I'll forget it by tomorrow—but you have to remember Unagi-san for the rest of your life. No matter how much you hated him."

"Well then, Kujirai-san."

With her half-dried white hair, Kyouko-san turned to Kujirai and took a deep bow.

"Some other time, if we ever meet again—please do try seducing me from scratch."

18

"It's as you said, Kyouko-san. Unagi-san's best time has been stagnating for a while now—but that's just in numbers. I tried asking around his coach and friends, but there didn't seem to be any signs he was considering suicide."

Meeting up with her outside the gym, Officer Hijiori walked beside her giving her report. With her eyes red from the pool and her hair as white as ever, Kyouko-san who had become somewhat rabbitlike didn't seem particularly surprised.

"Perhaps the closer he was to them, the harder it was to open up."

"Then why did Kujirai-san accept? It's not as if he took the money, right?"

"And they weren't close friends of any stripe. If I had to say, a man's honor? ... I'm sure you could also say he wanted to act cool. Just as Unagi-san didn't want it to be seen as suicide, you could say he felt the same—birds of a feather and all that."

"Were they friends, or were they not? Which is it?"

"They were men."

Shrugging her shoulders, a slight smile on her face—by her tone, she was somewhat enjoying herself, so perhaps that was supposed to be a joke. Whatever the case, what followed was the police's job... without enough evidence to apprehend him, Officer Hijiori could only wait for Kujirai to come himself.

He won't run anymore, or so Kyouko-san gave her stamp of approval.

"Well then, Officer Hijiori. Now that that's settled, I don't mean to pressure you, but it's about time I got paid."

By the time they reached the station, Kyouko-san's face had turned from a detective to a manager—present time ten at night, only two hours left of the day. The Okitegami Detective Agency generally dealt with in-cash payments within the day—she would forget by the next day, so there really was no other option.

"I know. As you can see, I properly prepared it during the day. Have a check. And could I get a receipt?"

Officer Hijiori said as he produced an envelope from the inner pocket of his suit and courteously handed it over—with the hand movements of a seasoned banker, Kyouko-san counted the bills inside, but there she tilted her head perplexedly.

"My apologies, Officer Hijiori. I can't write up a receipt for this."

"Eh? Huh, that's strange. Was it not enough?"

Despite her gentle, polite tone, in a sense, as she indicated the deficiency, her eyes were far harsher than when she indicated the truth of the case, and Officer Hijiori was quite overwhelmed.

"I'm sure I prepared the amount we agreed on... ah, that's right, I've got it. You're wrong, Kyouko-san. See, the tax, meaning ten percent, you said you'd give me a discount from your regular fees."

When Officer Hijiori pointed that out,

"I never said that. I mean, I have absolutely no recollection."

The Challenge of Okitegami Kyouko

Said the forgetful detective.

Chapter 2:

Miss Kyouko's Locked Room Lecture

1

"Oh believe me, I'd love nothing more than to aid your investigation, being the upstanding citizen I am. But truth is, I'm as stumped as you are. It's completely baffling how this could have happened. I'm really sorry I can't be of more help."

Apology was etched into every line of the suspect's face, the words spilling out with practiced ease—a classic line for a murderer, it was, surprisingly, shrewd and troublesome to counter. Eschewing any feeble excuses or attempts at explanation, but simply persisting in claiming ignorance—in choosing not to deceive with lies, but asserting they had nothing to say about the case, detecting contradictions through reasoning and interrogation would be nigh impossible. No amount of head-scratching or hectoring was likely to elicit a confession that said, "Sorry, it was me." Presumably well-aware of this, the suspect added,

"Because I honestly don't remember a thing about it."

With such nonchalance, perfectly composed.

We could not say there was no remorse or regret whatsoever for the life taken—it could have been all a matter of self-preservation, doing what it took to survive. One might even find sympathy in such circumstances—but not she who stood face to face with the suspect.

Okitegami Kyouko—the while-haired detective listened unmoved to the suspect's stubborn silence and offered not an ounce of sympathy.

"I'm afraid that is my line."

She maintained a sweet smile.

"The one who remembers nothing—is I."

2

——Murders in locked rooms and the like don't happen in reality, anything more than the pages of detective novels.

Pure fiction is this notion itself, was what Officer Tooasa thought. Never having told anyone, the boy who'd decided to take up the badge inspired by the detective stories he loved to read couldn't count how many times he'd read that line.

Although in terms of fiction versus nonfiction, "locked room murders" are more common in real life than you might think. Not in the strict sense of detective stories of course—with their absurdly intricate tricks that leave the reader astonished at their unveiling—All there was were practical motives urging killers to 'hide the body,' to 'keep it from being seen.'

In order to keep the crime hidden, yes, but perhaps even more intensely, to avoid confronting the stark reality of having killed, something so immovably tangible they wish to banish from their sight.

It's not about keeping it in, but keeping it out.

So they shove the body in an empty room.

And bolt the door.

Creating a secret room impervious to the outside world—Officer Tooasa had found himself in such scenes all too often over the years, and always, it left the mystery reader in him disillusioned.

What distinguishes the fictional crime from the real may be the criminal's mind—but let's not repeat the cliché, so common in mysteries, that "if they were intelligent enough to devise an elaborate ruse, they would surely be wise enough not to risk murder."

The criminal in a detective story, as Officer Tooasa saw it, should stand as a rival and equal in rank to the detective, someone who, when unmasked, does not falter but calmly, even proudly, explains the chain of logic that led up to the crime. Like famed detectives, criminals ought to be masters of rhetoric.

But in actuality, real criminals are rarely so.

By and large, they are driven to the brink of desperation and forced to commit monstrous crimes, staking their lives just trying to cover them up. In a lawful nation, when you think about it, a criminal's enemy isn't some detective, it's the state itself—it'd be a miracle for anyone to keep a sound mind.

Whoever was behind this case must have been so afraid of capture that in his frenzy he came up with such a bizarre locked-room mystery. Not only was the motive unclear, the whole thing was incomprehensible.

Of this Tooasa was sure.

(To call it a locked room is a stretch, it's an awfully small space—and unusual to boot.)

Unusual, or rather, very alien.

Far more out of his comfort zone than locked rooms or murder cases.

The crime scene: a changing room in a trendy boutique—fitting room, that is. It was a brand outlet for young women, and a place that a man like Officer Tooasa in his forties couldn't be caught dead in—just earlier he'd earned a round of snickers from his subordinates by inappropriately referring to it as a "clothes shop."

The victim was Yanei Sashiko.

Said to have been a regular patron of the clothing store, "Nashorn"—a twenty-two-year-old working single woman.

No matter how seasoned Officer Tooasa became in the field, each murder case always left a sour taste, but the death of a young woman like this was especially heartbreaking. Her bright dyed hair and oversized sunglasses were far too glamorous as decorations on a corpse.

The cause of death: blunt force trauma. A single strike to the head.

Lying at the scene in the fitting room was the presumed murder weapon: a clothes hanger. Such mundane object transformed into a killing tool, it was almost comical, but certainly nobody was laughing.

Besides, it wasn't the typical flimsy wire or plastic hanger Tooasa was used to from his regular clothes shopping. These were solid wood and a proper blow could do serious damage. Struck just right, it could indeed kill.

The hanger was normally in use in this store, still with the brand logo carved into it. One such probably cost more than Officer Tooasa's overcoat, not that it mattered.

Important was the hangers being store-exclusive. The police theory went that the murderer seized one in a heated moment and swung it at the victim, Yanei Sashiko's head, suggesting it was hardly premeditated—who plans murder with a clothes hanger? The victim died, and the most rattled would have been the killer himself—which is why,

A locked room had been created.

Shoving body and weapon in a dressing room, shutting the door with a click—

(...Can't really click shut though.)

—No way would it slam shut either.

It was, after all, just a dressing room. This 'door' was more like a piece of wispy curtain, and the 'lock' just a hook casually engaged.

It couldn't make a sound.

Breachable with ease from inside or outside, it was hardly a locked room at all, really. Not even a room that required unlocking; you could just crawl in from under the curtain. The fitting room offered at best a modicum of privacy for customers trying on clothes. It may have a ceiling above, but an avid reader of mystery novels would deem such a set up hardly deserving of the title 'locked room'.

(But—)

But beyond the structure of a locked room, there was another aspect to consider. An enigma, in fact, far stranger and more perplexing than locked rooms.

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"Excuse m—"
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"Eek!"

A voice from behind startled him so great he jumped, and really did jump, a good five centimeters into the air. Tooasa was no scaredycat. In fact, having trained in police kendo and judo, he was as sturdy as they come. The shock, therefore, was from being snuck up on without him noticing.

Standing at the scene of the crime, deep in thought, but still to not notice someone approaching so close... He spun around, wondering how long they'd been there, but no one was.

For an absurd moment he entertained the unbefitting thought that it was the victim's ghost he heard. But this was simply a difference in height.

Glancing down a bit, there stood a bespectacled woman with all-white hair, smiling broadly back at him. Dressed in a duffle coat with a thick scarf and knee-high boots. Even to Officer Tooasa's unfashioned eye, it was immediately apparent that she was impeccably styled.

"Uh, umm... Sorry miss, right now this clothes store... this boutique... It's off limits..."

Her striking white hair, apparently natural, made it difficult to tell, but she appeared in her twenties, about the same age bracket as the victim. The boutique's main clientele, no doubt. A stylish young woman here to shop, it looked like, somehow slipping past the crime tape and guards? Puzzled, Tooasa determined she had to be sent away.

"Certainly, this is a mesmerizing array of clothing lined up here, but no, I assure you I am not a customer."

"Huh? Eh?"

His assumption proven wrong, a baffled Tooasa found himself handed a business card by the white-haired woman. She bowed deeply.

"Officer Tooasa in charge of this crime scene, correct? Pleased to meet you, I'm Okitegami Kyouko, chief of Okitegami Detective Agency here to assist in the investigation." 3

The rumors of Okitegami Kyouko preceded her. She was, to put it bluntly, a celebrity.

The forgetful detective, as she is known.

The fastest of detectives, who 'solves any case in a day,' was so because of her unique ability to forget everything, including the case, the culprit and the process of deduction, the next day. Being the fastest was but a matter of course.

Somewhat reminiscent of certain types of fish that must keep swimming or die; of course, it was a high level of detective capability that underpin her fame and monikers as both "fastest detective" and "forgetful detective."

A detective like those in mystery novels.

This sounds somewhat unnatural but, in summary, if you were to ask the reason for her appearance at "Nashorn," the boutique, it would appear to be the police chief's meddling.

Her Okitegami Detective Agency (apparently consisting of Okitegami Kyouko alone) was often called to crime scenes under the pretext of "providing support". Though the practice of police requesting help from a private detective, even if not legally prohibited, would normally raise eyebrows, when the forgetful detective was concerned the rules of the game seemingly change totally.

The fact she would forget all details of the case and any such request made her the epitome of discretion. There could be no loose ends.

That may have been the rationale, initially. Now, the department called her in regardless, evident in the many cases she had helped crack, such as the sensational "Plastic Bottle Murder" or the eternally unsolved "Grand Reunion Killings." As far as Officer Tooasa knew, no few colleagues had advanced their careers in part thanks to taking credit for her cracked cases.

Precisely why she was now able to casually duck under the police tape and enter the locked-down store—with her face pass. However, up until this moment, Officer Tooasa had never even seen this forgetful detective.

It was the first time he had met her.

Not that he had avoided her on purpose but, rather, whatever difficult case emerged, he had not once appealed to his superiors for help. Even if the opportunity presented itself, the thought of going and meeting the forgetful detective had never crossed his mind.

When it's the detective who forgets everything the next day you're dealing with, no matter how many times you work together, the next time you meet at a crime scene it's back to square one—'nice to meet you'. Officer Tooasa had heard more than one such complaint at work (She basically had a face pass permitting her to crime scenes, but she never remembered the faces of the officers on duty.) In Tooasa's case, however, it was really the first time "nice meeting" her.

The reason he would not rely on the forgetful detective being, his professional pride as inspector and public servant would never allow himself to commission a private detective—but unfortunately that wasn't it. If only he possessed such gallant, unyielding spirit, how much easier life would be. The simple truth was, he was jealous.

Officer Tooasa did in fact read mystery novels that had inspired him to enlist but, with no doubt in mind, his true ambition had always been to become a great detective and solve mysteries left and right.

While "detective" was a legitimate occupation however, "famed detective" wasn't. Detectives were supposed to gather information, they didn't crack cases for sport.

Becoming a cop seemed the next best thing, and plenty of masterpieces in mystery fiction featured police officers as the heroes besides. In detective novels, police are often confined to the role of mere sidekicks for the famed detectives in readers' minds, regrettably, a situation that brought Officer Tooasa immense frustration. Investigating crime, confronting criminals, keeping the peace—that was real police work. It was while wrestling with these somewhat egocentric complexes that he was made aware of the forgetful detective.

She, genuinely, was called a famed detective out of respect, not irony. She, as if sprung from fiction, sought after by the police to cooperate in their cases. Her existence was, to him, unbearably enviable. For this very reason he had avoided her—until today.

These delusions of victimhood had begun to border on the obsessive, he had to admit. But having put all this hard work into

reaching this point as a police officer, he couldn't stand the thought of being reduced to foil with the detective's grand entrance.

But he hadn't expected this detective to look so... ordinary. Different from the imposing figures in mystery novels, she was gentle and refined. Just as real-life "locked rooms" didn't necessarily match their fictional counterparts, so too did not all "famed detectives" walk around with pipes in their mouths, it seems.

"Appreciate the offer, but this case is under control. So, little miss, you may go..."

Caught off guard and a beat too slow, he nonetheless managed to be the first to speak, requesting her departure. Relieved that the investigation on site was nearing its close, with his men questioning the store staff in the third floor office, Tooasa was alone on the sales floor. His plan was to discreetly get rid of her before anyone saw her—her white hair had already attracted the attention of the guards, but as long as he kept them quiet no one else would be the wiser—but by the time he made his move, she was nowhere to be seen.

She who had come from nowhere was just as suddenly gone. In the half-second he had faltered, she had veered off with lightning speed towards the fitting rooms.

"So the body was found here? Appears to have been moved already, no bloodstains though. The victim didn't bleed?"

"U-umm, little miss, c-could you not."

He sped to her side to find her already inspecting the site on her own. The 'fastest detective, moving the moment you glance away,' he realized, was even faster in reality. He should have known better than to take his eyes off her...

However, she seemed overlook the tiny detail that she was squatting down by the room next to where the body was found. Well, they looked the same.

"Could you please stop calling me 'little miss'? I may not recall my own birthdate but, by accounts, I am twenty-five; hardly an age to be called little."

Turning to him with an innocent smile,

You may call me Kyouko if you like, she said.

He did not feel right addressing her so informally, but 'little miss' would be inappropriate now. His well-intentioned formality was pointless if it offended her.

"Kyouko-san, the victim's body was in the next room over."

"Was it?"

"Ahem, not on the left—on the right..."

In the row of six fitting rooms, the body was in the third room from the right as you count. However, even within that room there were no traces of blood or signs of murder. The victim did not bleed despite the heavy strike to the head, just as Kyouko-san had noted.

So great detectives can deduce the truth without even seeing the body, huh—he was about to muse in this direction, but he simply

felt daunted by the fact. Even Sherlock Holmes couldn't deduce anything if he got the crime scene wrong.

In fact, neither could Kyouko-san,

"Uh-huh, Wouldn't know that."

She said, without a hint of embarrassment at her error. She slipped off her boots and slid into the fitting room in question—into the fitting room?

Her actions lacked haste, so natural that despite this blatant transgression transpiring before his very eyes, Officer Tooasa could not muster the will to stop her.

A room so recently vacated by a corpse would not be a place anyone in their right mind would venture into, yet just like that she'd defied that expectation. Though with the investigation having concluded there was no particular difficulty in doing so.

"Kyouko-san, I—"

"One moment please."

The curtain swooped shut behind her.

His outstretched hand was just shy of reaching it—no click of a lock, as expected. But the unnatural sway of the curtain indicated that as it was drawn closed, the hook had caught.

Marching in without permission and secluding herself at a crime scene, even for a detective sent by the chief, was grounds for arresting her on the spot. However, seeing how things unfolded, his earlier statements might need retracting.

It was just a fitting room partitioned off by curtains, with a hook to hang your clothes, a poor excuse for a locked room that could easily be unlocked from the outside or slipped into from below the curtain. That's what he told himself but, when actually put in that situation, there was nothing he could do.

For a locked room it was physically flawed yet psychologically as formidable as welded metal. Why, the rustling of fabric could be heard from inside.

Was she changing?

Well, just using a dressing room for its intended purpose—but this meant he couldn't now pull back the curtain. It would raise ruckus if she screamed. The last thing he needed was his men rushing in at her shriek.

"P-pardon, Kyouko-san, what might you be doing?"

"Of course I'm changing clothes."

"P-please refrain from changing clothes at the crime scene, if you can help it."

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The turn of events left Officer Tooasa at a loss for words, and he could only call out to her from the curtain, still unclear of what was transpiring. Then, with a whoosh, the curtain was pulled open—and there was Kyouko-san, completely changed into a different outfit.

Now wearing a loose white and red checkered sundress that fell to mid-thigh, coupled with a pair of skinny jeans underneath.

Huh—Even Tooasa had noticed.

Though in his eyes all clothes (especially women's) looked the same, at that moment he couldn't help noticing her ensemble had come from Nashorn—the tags were still on, after all.

Apparently, when she had slipped into the dressing room, she had at some point also taken clothes on display next to her, as one does, in accordance with the rule of taking no more than two items in at once.

"Fufufu, this brand is simply lovely. I might just become a loyal customer," she said, handing one of the hangers she held to Officer Tooasa. As he blankly accepted it, he heard her ask, "The murder weapon wouldn't happen to be a hanger like this, would it?"

He gasped in thought.

How would she know a hanger was the murder weapon? He had assumed she'd changed clothes at random—at an unbelievable speed at that, he was about to say—but could it be she had been examining the scene, in detective fashion, behind the curtain? Without a body or evidence left?

"Oh no, I just happened to bump into some forensic people and they told me about it."

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What a shocking answer—but on second thought, not so shocking. They all knew her but getting investigation details out of forensic personnel passing by—as skilled as detectives may be at investigating originally, it's not that easy.

The goal of her express change was apparently to provide clothes hangers...matching the murder weapon. Two hangers? One for herself, and one for him?

Just taking the clothes off would have been enough, was changing necessary?

"Heavy and sturdy indeed, this hanger. You're unlikely to stand a chance being bludgeoned by this."

Kyouko-san had just stepped outside cradling the clothes she'd been wearing until a moment ago. Just like when taking them off, the act of pulling on her long boots, which are supposed to take time to put on and take off, was performed as effortlessly as if sliding into a pair of sandals.

"Yeah, but... this doesn't exactly spring to mind as a weapon."

"No, it doesn't. To be done in by something like this, what a depressing way to die. Though I suppose being murdered in any way would be no less depressing."

"Then could it be a spur of the moment thing? Where the culprit did not mean to kill her, just grabbed a hanger that happened to be at hand and struck out, without ever imagining she would die."

"Perhaps. It's also possible it was made to appear that way."

After exiting the fitting room, Kyouko-san strolled around the store, glancing at the hats and shoes on the shelves out of the corner of her eye. Seeing her like this, she really was no different from any other shopper.

"M-made to appear that way? What do you mean by that?"

"What I mean is, perhaps the murderer wanted people to believe it was impulsive and unplanned, without intent to kill. Convince others that it was manslaughter, not murder, to possibly get a lighter sentence... And if so, this would be one tough murder to solve. Because criminals typically focus on not getting caught, but our culprit also had that possibility in mind."

This was not Officer Tooasa's thinking.

Assuming the role of a criminal in a detective novel—whereby a meticulous plan is crafted and considerable time taken to carry out the crime—may result in harsher punishment if caught, due to the perceived high degree of malice. Conversely, crimes committed on impulse and without forethought are more likely to be considered "non-malicious." Demonstrating remorse—even if insincere—has the potential to significantly lighten a sentence. And with a clever enough lawyer, probation can even save the day.

If the culprit had indeed planned this far ahead, it would prove to be quite cunning for sure—worse than a murder disguised as an accident. While evading capture would be, of course, the ultimate goal, deliberately assuming the guise of a bubbling criminal, with the intention of potentially lessening the severity of the repercussions to be endured upon apprehension, is a startling shift in perspective.

From using a clothes hanger as a weapon to crafting a simplistic locked room, Officer Tooasa had painted the picture of a murderer with less than stellar mental constitution. Yet now seemed the time to discard such notions; they could trip him up.

And, with that,

"Ah!"

He came to himself with a start, unwittingly swept up in the rhythm of Kyouko-san. Losing the lead to the detective—wouldn't this really make him the cop sidekick in the mystery?

Was this the time to be impressed?

"Erm...So, Kyouko-san."

"Yes, what could it be?"

"Clearly there's been some kind of mistake. The chief must have misunderstood. To trouble you to come all this way in the midst of your busy schedule, I really must apologize. But we have ample manpower on this case already, there's no need for your assistance. So, if you mind..."

Foolish though it may be to try shoo away a detective who had already intruded on the scene, Officer Tooasa bravely attempted it, cementing his role as foil—but Kyouko-san, shaking the hanger in her hand,

"Please, rest easy," she said.

The gesture was not particularly dramatic but the knowledge that this thing was capable of killing made him feel faintly menaced.

"The chief's order is not for me to investigate the case, and I have no intention of interfering with your methods or deductions, officer."

The chief informs me that you, Officer Tooasa in charge of the scene, are exceptional—said she.

And Tooasa, who had previously resented the chief for bringing in a detective unasked, now felt a twinge of guilt and shame.

But then, why was she here?

"An assistant, or... I was asked to advise. After all, investigating a boutique may perplex a man."

He conceded her point.

Although he regarded the affair as a slight nuisance, he had to admit that the help was much appreciated. Having foisted questioning staff onto his colleagues, he felt adrift in an alien world speaking a foreign language. Fashion patois baffled him utterly.

His younger colleagues, regardless of their potential advantage over him, seemed to be struggling just the same. He'd thought to call for a female officer because of this, but it turned out the chief had already sorted that out for him.

In simple terms, Kyouko-san had been invited this time not as a detective but for her fashion sense. Stylish as she was, her taste would be faultless. Little wonder she was said to never wear the same outfit twice.

And this was probably the chief's very own way of making it easier for him to interact and work with the forgetful detective, a position in which he would be more amenable...

"In that case, I'll be counting on your guidance. I don't have a clue when it comes to clothes..."

Feeling the obvious change in attitude, he felt great relief to know that the detective had no intention of deducing and readily asked for her assistance.

"Leave it to me. I promise not to interfere,"

Kyouko-san assured.

"... By the way, Officer Tooasa, might you call over one of the clerks?"

"...? What for?"

He was struck with alarm at once.

She couldn't possibly be using the translation of fashion jargon as an excuse to do detective work In the course of a boutique investigation, could she?

"I wish to purchase this dress and these jeans, but it would appear there is nobody at the counter,"

Said she.

To wish to buy clothes in a store where murder had just taken place—fashion advisor with guts, that she was.

4

The forgetful detective's skill at interpretation was, in all truthfulness, outstanding. After initial sluggishness, interrogations taking place within the third-floor office, of staff and customers—some amongst whom, at the time, was in the midst of making a purchase when the body had been discovered—progressed expeditiously once she joined in. Known as the fastest of detectives, not only was her individual efficiency impressive, but she also seemed to speed up everyone around her.

Officer Tooasa had been apprehensive for Kyouko's daily memory resets could potentially cause her to be out of touch with current trends and new terms would stump her in the ever-changing industry of fashion. But it seems that he was worrying unnecessarily.

"While my knowledge hasn't updated past a 'certain' point, I'm lucky to have a sufficient foundation, all the studying I did on the way here helped. I believe I'll manage."

She had said it casually, but filling gaps in memory while playing a phone game on the commute was anything but casual. Officer Tooasa lamented his own waning morale in comparison.

However, the knowledge she strove to cram in would vanish by the very next day. Unable to fathom what might possibly transpire within the forgetful detective's mind, Officer Tooasa found it a

rather bleak and sad thing. But Kyouko-san herself appeared perfectly nonchalant in this regard.

"No, I really enjoy chatting with all sorts of different people!"

She radiated satisfaction.

Her high spirits seemed to be due to Officer Tooasa covering the cost of the dress and jeans that she wanted. So it seems that the rather unflattering rumor that the detective is stingy in this case is not unfounded.

He had bought them for her solely on presuming having her wear the store's clothing while questioning staff and customers might make a favorable impression (The outrageous cost had nearly given him a heart attack, so he was, naturally, planning to expense it.)

The strategy had worked out pretty well, garnering them many informal accounts that the police alone could not have been able to extract. Still, far from celebrating his success, Officer Tooasa was not at all satisfied. Regardless of the not-so-locked room—the intense sense of dissonance that he felt outside of the case itself remained, unabated. Even more so, as the testimonies became increasingly detailed, his malaise intensified.

He had once wondered if perhaps his confusion was due to not fully understanding what was being said to him, leading to misunderstandings due to twisted citations. But that did not seem to be the case. So what was going on here?

"Well then, my work for today is done. Goodbye to you. I'll settle the payment directly with the chief of police at the station. Thank you for your patronage, and I look forward to your continued support of our detective agency."

"W-wait, no!"

Kyouko-san was about to leave Nashorn after her bow when Officer Tooasa intervened to keep her. It wasn't that he had any brilliant insight, mind you—rather that seeing her stroll away so straightforwardly triggered the reflex to stop her.

"Oh? What seems to be the trouble? Do you require further interpretation?"

"Ah, no, we're good with the interpretations..."

Having finished questioning the majority of the relevant persons, he felt he had grasped the fashion terminology that was initially Greek to him thanks to her. Even though he couldn't speak the vocabulary, he felt confident he could handle them simply as a listener. By all accounts, Kyouko's work as an assistant translator was indeed done for the day.

"Something's been bothering me... I'd like to ask your opinion, Kyouko-san, if you don't mind."

"Mnnnnn..."

There, Kyouko-san exhibited a demeanor of hesitation, almost as if she was withholding something.

"I was planning to have dinner before settling the bill. So, if you would be kind enough to treat me to a meal, I would hardly mind."

Kyouko-san said in a calm tone, with a chuckle—not making it any harder to perceive her blatant blackmail, but let's leave it be—it just happened to be dinnertime as well.

It goes without saying that Officer Tooasa would not dream of taking a lady like her to his usual spots like the diners or pubs. Therefore, in spite of knowing he would be teased by his subordinates, he had to ask them—self-proclaimed food connoisseurs—to recommend a suitably classy restaurant...

And so it was that the two of them headed to a mid-to-high-end Italian restaurant located not too far from the boutique, Nashorn.

Sitting in there, he had the distinct feeling all the other customers were staring at them—a case of excessive self-consciousness on his part—the truth was, If anybody was being looked at, it was likely Kyouko-san for her shock of white hair.

As for the center of attention, Kyouko-san herself seemed unperturbed by the glares smoldering at her back.

"Allow me to begin. My apologies if it appears I'm pressing you."

If it appears? It's exactly what she was doing.

Could the fastest detective also be the oddest? Musing about such irrelevant minutiae, Tooasa, too, began to sample the dishes that had been served on the table. The food here was supposed to be very appetizing according to his colleagues, but because of some inexplicable tension, he could not find his appetite.

"Well? What did you have to ask me? Is there something in the testimonies that isn't clear?" Ah, the 'forgetful detective' had not forgotten her role. She asked straightforwardly without much

pause—quite a relief for him who had struggled to broach the subject.

"No, thanks to you, the investigation is proceeding smoothly... Kyouko-san, what do you make of this case?"

"Nothing at all,"

She replied instantly.

"This is because it does not fall within the scope of my current business. The investigation is left to you professionals—I just thought it was a charming boutique so I hope they reopen soon."

"Is that so..."

Would it be premature to say she was as humble and polite as to not appear like a detective at all? Officer Tooasa had heard from colleagues who had worked with Kyouko-san on multiple occasions that she was typically assertive, the kind to consistently elbow her way into investigations. Today, however, she appeared oddly docile. Was she being cooperative simply because she had been invited to the scene as a "fashion advisor"?

Her unsolicited changing of clothes in the fitting room, was it as he originally thought, just a meticulous interpretation carried out of professionalism? Scrutinizing the murder weapon too—just stating general points, not deducing. Wasn't it?

When it comes to professionalism, she did possess a high sense of it—which, on the other hand, might be manifestation of her miserly conviction; no deduction without a fee.

"I certainly have thoughts and opinions. However, I'm presently keen to know your theories, seeing as the chief of police praised you so highly."

There was something insinuating in her smile.

The bar had been set disastrously high without his knowledge—just what honeyed words had the chief been spouting? Tooasa's blood boiled once again.

However, he certainly had no intention of relying on her deduction. His interest was only to confirm the discomforted feeling of his.

Although circumstances had swept them into this fancy restaurant, a quick chat at the scene should have sufficed.

"Um, you, Kyouko-san, as an interpreter today, must have also overheard the staff and customers talking... indirectly, of course."

Kyouko-san as the interpreter had more than overheard things indirectly. She had heard everything directly. He was the one hearing things secondhand from his men's reports.

"Yes, I heard everything. But please don't worry yourself. By tomorrow I will have forgotten any and all secrets of the investigation."

As I am the forgetful detective—added she.

It was exactly the unique selling point of the forgetful detective—whether delving into details about victims, families, or even culprits, the chance of such information leaking to the outside world is absolutely nil. She forgets, after all—there is no safer way to protect information than total obliteration.

"Notice anything strange? From what they all were saying..."

"Hmh, did I?"

Kyouko-san made a pause.

From that reaction, it was as if she had caught on to 'something,' but her demeanor indicated reluctance to share. She seemed to be grappling with the idea that pointing out any irregularities might cast her in the role of an unsolicited detective. At last Kyouko-san must have concluded that it still fell within her responsibilities as an interpreter, or perhaps she had drawn the line at 'so long as I refrain from deducing.'

"Assuming everybody's account holds true, Yanei-san was not hidden in that fitting room post-murder but was murdered right there—in a space no larger than a tatami mat,"

She said lightly.

This was hardly dinnertime conversation, Officer Tooasa realized belatedly—though Kyouko-san did not appear to mind as she proceeded to sample her meal gracefully with knife and fork.

"Only after trying on clothes there myself did I realize—two could hardly stand, let alone move in there. And that is assuming two women. For one of your build, officer, even alone it would feel cramped."

He had suspected as much.

Fitting rooms are designed for privacy, and limited space is to be expected. However, it is a different matter altogether when one becomes the scene of murder.

In narrow constraints like that, it is difficult to even quarrel, much less murder right; the space simply did not allow for it. Not so bad that you could not grab a hanger and take a swing, but challenging still. And the recipient would hardly stand and take it...Resistance would come easily at such close quarters.

Despite this, the victim's body showed no sign of struggle...

"However," Kyouko-san said, "piecing together all the witness accounts leads to this conclusion. As Yanei-san was witnessed entering the fitting room."

Right, there were witnesses.

She was in sight right up until she slipped behind that curtain, and was never seen coming out again.

The store staff, growing increasingly unsettled by what seemed to be a persistently occupied fitting room, tentatively called out to her a few times. Met with silence, and deeming it a matter of urgency, they unhooked the latch from the outside and drew back the curtain. It was then that they found her dead inside.

"Brazen murder in a crowded store in broad daylight is terrifying enough. Other customers were there, even possibly trying on clothes in the next room over."

"We haven't questioned all the customers who were present, but witness accounts thus far indicate both adjacent fitting rooms were empty."

"Rather than whether someone was actually in there or not, it's about the possibility—if it was premeditated, the killer should have

been wary of 'someone being next door'. It may be correct to judge then that the culprit acted on impulse, disregarding consequences."

Or—staged it so.

It was as if logic conundrums were toys for Kyouko-san to amuse herself with. Things being confusing enough as they were, you might wish she'd stop playing people like this.

For Kyouko-san, who had in a certain sense already completed her entrusted task, speaking of the case as if it were none of her concern may be merely be habit. However, no matter how unassuming her manner of speaking, her insights were keen and provoked thought, as Officer Tooasa thought. An open storefront should be the last place anyone would choose to commit murder.

Too many potential witnesses.

Even if you had doubts about the adjacent fitting room, you couldn't ignore the crowd before you entered. The store wasn't usually bustling, but holidays had drawn in a number of customers so high that inspectors had their hands full with questioning alone.

And not only eyewitnesses.

This wasn't exactly a quaint detective novel setting—CCTV cameras monitored every corner of the store, in full operation during business hours. Being an upscale establishment, security in this regard had to be foolproof.

They weren't tiny pinhole cameras; they were impossible to overlook with a slight upward glance. While there might be margin for errors and misinterpretations with human accounts, machines made no such blunders. A thorough analysis of the recorded footage was necessary, of course, but essentially, we must regard the images captured as absolute.

"But modern video camera designs sure are stylish."

Kyouko-san interjected with this somewhat off-the-mark comment. From what he'd seen, Officer Tooasa did not consider the cameras exactly modern (more like antiquated), but soon enough, it clicked to him that this was the peculiar drawback of the forgetful detective.

Since her memory does not update, her definition of 'modern' increasingly diverged from reality. The incoming fashion terminology she had adequately prepared for, but anything not previewed was completely unknown to her.

Without any particular obligation to explain this point, he, feeling it necessary as somebody assisting in the investigation, casually ran through the structure.

"That is a wide-angle camera that manages images via Wi-Fi. A network camera, if you will. The footage is stored on the cloud and controlled by the store manager from a computer in the office, I think. So it would be tough to tamper with."

"Wha... Wi-Fi? Clou-oud?"

Kyouko-san tilted her head quizzically, as if hearing words from another planet. 'Cloud' was one thing, but Wi-Fi had become relatively common vernacular ages ago, so just how far back did her memory go without updating—Officer Tooasa had thought of it as just a few, but it could well be ten, even fifteen years.

Or maybe all of them...

Hesitating to tread that far into curiosity, Officer Tooasa made do with simply giving a brief explanation of "Wi-Fi" and "cloud".

"Wow, talk about high-tech!"

She looked very happy, nodding frequently in admiration.

Apparently delighted in having absorbed new knowledge—a detective without curiosity wouldn't be much of one for sure. But no matter how much she learned—no matter what Tooasa taught her—she'd forget all about it by tomorrow.

"I see, I see. But bear in mind, security cameras are not foolproof. There are always blind spots."

"That's true."

Strictly speaking, it's not unfeasible to set up security cameras in such a way as to reduce blind spots to practically zero. However, if that were done, every square inch of the ceiling would be covered in cameras.

That would be quite ugly.

Customers couldn't find peace of mind in such an environment, let alone enjoy shopping.

"That is the tricky part, yes. Make security too tight and it gives ordinary customers the feeling they're being suspected of wrongdoing. Not a pleasant experience."

"Yeah. And if you raise security awareness too conspicuously, paradoxically, it gives the impression of an unsafe environment."

Officer Tooasa believed this principle applied not only to cameras but all crime prevention tactics and regulations.

"The number of security cameras in the store seems perfectly reasonable given the circumstances. They also use security tags to properly manage their merchandise."

"Security tags."

She repeated—unaware of security tags, no surely she wasn't— Kyouko-san obviously knew of them and went on to say,

"But neither cameras nor tags managed to prevent a murder."

True enough, anti-theft measures only go so far. Crimes of impulse or desperation are difficult to prevent. Assuming these crimes are committed with the expectation of being caught, serving as a police officer must feel rather pointless—but, this is not always the case, so let's not jump to conclusions.

"As far as we can tell from eyewitness accounts and CCTV footage, something's off about this case. Besides the closed fitting room, the public's eye seems to have formed a 'locked room' of sorts."

"Locked room, you say?"

Caught off guard by her recognition of his attempt to simplify the explanation for her, he floundered a moment. Those were not the sort of words one should use around a detective.

Kyouko-san had repeated the phrase this time not out of lack of understanding.

Locked rooms only exist in detective fiction, or so people think. They exist in reality in various forms, whether or not they are called "locked rooms" is another debate. The term brings connotations of mystery and thrill that might seem insensitive when applied to real-life crimes, as though making light of it. It wasn't jargon that a detective should use, let alone a police officer—a 'locked room formed by public eye' even, stretching the definition of a locked room, what a disaster.

As much as he had strived to separate his personal interests from his professional life, the unfamiliar restaurant setting—or perhaps the fact he was dining alone with a woman—had made him uncharacteristically nervous and allowed those words to slip out.

"Um, I-I beg your pardon, I promise I'm not just messing around..."

"No, not at all. You're correct, it really is a locked room. Could you be one of those who decided to become an inspector because you were a big fan of mystery novels?"

She had hit the bullseye.

He only let slip one offhand remark and it was as if she could see right through him. This must be a hallmark of her profession. Doubtless it was not based on any single word but rather an impression formed from his every word, action, and subtle cue. A simple denial—"It's not like that"—would do. But flustered as he was, Officer Tooasa wavered. At such a question, the slightest hesitation could be taken as affirmation.

"Fufu."

He was indeed feeling none too pleased, thinking that he was being mocked when she laughed at him like that. But, "How enviable it is to have such a compelling reason for your choice of profession," Kyouko-san continued on.

"I have long forgotten why I became a detective. To have such a clear personal motivation that you can openly profess, how I envy you. I wish I could say the same, that I pursued this line of work out of love for detective novels and admiration for famed detectives."

He wasn't quite sure what she was trying to say with that. At least it looked like her words were not meant to mock yet rightly or wrongly, he didn't consider "a love of detective novels" to constitute "a proper reason."

"It isn't all that unthinkable. In sports, are there not many who became professional athletes out of admiration for comic book heroes? There is no reason police officers or detectives cannot be motivated by the same."

She declared, incontrovertibly.

Although Officer Tooasa found this logic somewhat strained, it nevertheless helped alleviate some of his stubbornly embedded insecurities, at least by a little bit. Perhaps it was because such words had come from a detective, and not any detective but a famed one.

That being said, it was unmistakably clear to him she did not say all that just to make him feel better.

"Now then, to bring our discussion back to the locked room,"

She said and rolled up her sleeve in a show of determination.

"There exists no law against becoming either a detective or a police officer. However, murder is strictly forbidden by law. Now, whether this particular crime was meticulously planned or spontaneously committed remains to be seen—these circumstances, undeniably, have resulted in a peculiar locked room. To refute this irrefutable fact, allow me to begin scrutinizing it."

As she said, "I shall do my best to make sense of this, even if I am not of much help," Kyouko-san thumped her rolled-up arm onto the table, the inner side exposed as if preparing for a blood draw.

Even in the dimly-lit bar, her skin glowed like fresh snow. Almost too intense for a middle-aged man.

He did not know what this was, she had him befuddled with her string of actions.

"May I borrow a pen?" Kyouko-san, nonchalantly, stretched her right hand, plucked the ballpoint pen lodged in Officer Tooasa breast pocket, and uncapped it dexterously with one hand.

"The shop opens at ten o'clock."

She drew a line on her bare left arm near the wrist.

"The body was found at twelve noon—"

Another line higher up, near the elbow.

"The question is what transpired between these times, correct?"

"Ah, yes, yes..."

She had not rolled up her sleeve in a show of determination after all, it was to use her arm like a timeline... to literally write on it. To think she would treat her radiant, snow-white skin as a notebook was almost sacrilegious. She could have asked for paper or scribbled on a napkin. Tooasa had a notebook on him, for that matter.

Perhaps it was because of her absolute obligation to confidentiality that she wrote confidential matters on her body of all things, so she would have to scrub it off later, as part of her information management regimen.

"All in all, officer, begin by ascertaining all the eyewitness testimonies and security footage. Some statements might contain misunderstandings or lies, but for the time being, let us presume everything to be true."

"Misinterpretations or misunderstandings, I get that, but in what instances do you mean someone was lying, Kyouko-san? Does it imply that the culprit is among those we've already questioned?"

"I'm not here to deduce, that's not my job this time. The murderer could be amongst them, or not. But people, even innocent ones, sometimes perjure."

"Not the culprit yet lying in testimony... Maybe they know the criminal and want to protect him? Or at the least don't want to give active testimony. That what you mean?"

All he could do was make subtle inquiries and gauge her reaction, as Kyouko-san refused to cross the line between detective and advisor.

"And then there are those who simply prefer to stay clear of troublesome matters. After all, this matter concerns itself around murder. It's common sense to avoid incurring a killer's ire by not testifying."

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"Yes..."
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The customers who had left the store as soon as the body was discovered likely fall into that category. Compared to the gawkers who photographed the corpse with their smartphones, who's the Good Samaritan here?

"Some may deny seeing something they saw or claim they saw something they did not. Factor in all possibilities and evaluate them. As the Little Prince said, 'What is essential is invisible to the eye,' but what is visible to the eye is equally essential—who saw what? Let's unravel these testimonies."

"What is visible is equally essential... hm?"

Her words, as obvious as they may seem, carried a depth when said so lightly.

"If we believe every testimony yet the conclusion seems awry, it must mean somebody lied."

This is good old reverse proof, said she.

Using "trust" to sniff out lies... like a twisted mind game, as always. Not something to be carried out with such a smile.

"Are some lying—or has one deceived everybody?"

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Maybe all she was doing was motioning through possibilities one by one, but the idea of someone hoodwinking them all sounded remote to him. And if such a deception could be pulled off under such circumstances—fooling every customer in the store, coaxing them into false testimony—wouldn't this be a feat worthy of a criminal mastermind?

There's a detective; there's a locked room.

But no master criminal—we're in reality here.

"Yes. Never in my forgetful detective career have I met a criminal capable of such elaborate deception. Or perhaps my memory fails me again."

With the punchline inserted, Kyouko-san began verifying the facts.

"The victim, Yanei-san, entered the boutique at eleven that morning. We have an eyewitness, and the CCTV camera captured her walking through the entrance."

Whilst speaking Kyouko-san wrote on her arm the overview of the murder case—'Yanei arrived' between the wrist and elbow. Written on the soft flesh, yet still in immaculate handwriting.

"Once inside, she browsed the shop and selected several items of clothing before entering the fitting room. Multiple eyewitnesses observed her movements. With an outfit that eye-catching, she must have been hard to miss."

She had not seen the body herself, but Officer Tooasa's first impression suggested "eye-catching" was an understatement. To be matter-of-fact, "flamboyant" was more like it. He wondered if it only appeared too fashionable to him because he had no sense for such things. But if she had described it so, his impression had to be apt.

"Interestingly she was wearing Nashorn clothes from head to foot."

"People did mention she was a regular..."

Her outfit had looked different from the clothes Kyouko-san had selected earlier. A difference in style, perhaps?

"Yanei-san entered the fitting room and never came out again. She remained hidden inside until her body was discovered. No screams or quarrels were overheard."

"So it seems."

A wooden blunt instrument striking a head would barely resonate amidst the boutique's ambient music; faintly audible, but nobody would suspect it as the sound of murder.

Had there been people in adjacent fitting rooms, that'd be another story. But, there were no witnesses of that sort—if there were, by the time the body was discovered they had probably already left the store. Or, they didn't want to get involved and chose to stay mum—regardless, for now we assume all testimonies are true.

Under the premise of "nobody lied."

"Naturally," Kyouko-san underlined this point, her scribbled arm now resembling hieroglyphics.

"Nor was the culprit seen making their escape."

From another point of view, that's what was so incredible.

Killing in broad daylight—in a store with eyewitnesses and security cameras, or in a cramped fitting room, it was all a bit fa fetched for

just anybody to attempt, but you couldn't say there was absolutely nobody who would.

Not everybody consistently sticks to the best solution. Maybe due to momentary impulse or misconception, they make irrational and careless blunders like this. Piling up such colossal errors and still successfully escaping—was utterly irrational.

Furthermore, not only did anybody fail to see the culprit fleeing afterward, nobody reported seeing them enter the fitting room beforehand.

"Correct. The culprit might have been hiding inside all along, biding their time."

She said so but clearly not in earnest—who would be such an oblivious victim to walk into a fitting room where somebody lay in wait? And there wasn't even any place to hide; wherever they were hidden would have been plainly visible.

"If the fitting rooms didn't extend to the ceiling, the culprit could have climbed over the walls from one to another or escaped through the top somehow."

Nashorn's fitting rooms did have partitions all the way to the ceiling. Officer Tooasa dismissed that theory at once. Although not complex in construction—they could be dismantled with some tools if one is so willing, this however would draw more attention than naturally opening the curtain. Slipping in and out quietly when nobody was looking sounded more believable.

"It is very much a blind spot, since CCTV cameras cannot be pointed at the dressing rooms. No cameras are installed on the nearby ceilings either."

The area relied solely on human observation—as such, it might not be impossible to invade.

All you have to do is confirm nobody will see you and then sneak in the fitting room. But even so, the victim was still in there changing clothes when she was bludgeoned with a hanger—she would have screamed the moment the curtain was pulled back. Putting the issue of her screaming aside for a moment and focusing on the 'not being seen' point alone, there might still be a chance for intrusion.

However, how do we get out after sneaking in?

A fitting room is a fitting room, even if not locked.

Without drawing the curtain, you wouldn't know the situation outside—the design prevents those outside from seeing one inside changing, and vice versa, there's no way to tell if someone outside is looking this way, impossible to know the right moment to come out without detection. If at this moment a clerk felt this customer was taking unusually long to change and opened the curtain—

"I just did it without thinking too much—anyway, intentional or not, I happened to not be seen by anyone when I came out, that's probably the most reasonable explanation." Kyouko-san's explanation was really quite reasonable.

Not even on the job, her detective reasoning was so reasonable that it approached disbelief. Still, uncanny luck does, in fact, favor some criminals.

A "perfect" crime, it seems, isn't as complicated as you might think. Making elaborate plans and showing how clever you are tends to leave more clues and make it easier for the police to figure things out. The more obvious the trail of thought, the easier it is to spin a story. Perhaps a chaotic, seemingly contradictory approach is what truly stumps the authorities.

"This so-called 'locked room' has many holes, formed as it is by lines of sight. If the killer managed to slip through a blind spot and commit the crime unseen, they could have made a quick escape."

"But wouldn't security cameras capture the fugitive? Maybe we can't identify who, but surely we could narrow down the suspects to people who left the store after eleven..."

"Who's to say the killer fled outdoors? Mingling with customers might even be safer... and if the killer were, say, an employee, they can't exactly abandon their job on the clock."

Murder somebody and then go back to folding clothes? Tooasa found it hard to believe there were too many employees that dedicated. Based on the 'murdered without much thought' image of the killer he had in mind, they'd probably ignore the cameras and make a panicked escape. On the other hand, we couldn't rule out the possibility that our bungling culprit might have stayed at the scene simply because they didn't think things through. Panicked people do the most foolish things.

"All witness testimonies appear reliable without major discrepancies. A little far-fetched as a narrative, but nothing fundamentally implausible has occurred."

Kyouko-san declared the verdict.

Thus confirming his initial suspicion; if there were glaring inconsistencies or blatant errors in the statements, he wouldn't feel so troubled. Despite everything appearing logical, something about it felt off-putting still.

"If anything, avoiding detection by numerous individuals and surveillance cameras is highly unusual... but, not entirely inconceivable that they could evade capture, given the existence of blind spots for both parties."

"So based on your deduction, the culprit didn't intentionally play tricks on this point?"

The word 'tricks,' coming from a policeman, might be somewhat reckless, but he had long since abandoned any pretense of shame. Unfortunately, the reply he received was,

"No, no, no. I don't do deductions, remember?"

Stubbornly frustrating.

"It's merely hypothesis. I deliberately avoid deep thought as it leads me to verbalize my ideas excessively. When an interpreter starts inserting their own interpretations, communication becomes harder, does it not?"

She was right.

On the other hand, Officer Tooasa typically enjoyed watching foreign films with subtitles since he appreciated how interpreters simplify and complement dialogue. Therefore, listening to Kyoukosan's interpretation shouldn't be problematic despite its non-literal nature.

"Being a responsible adult, I cannot allow myself to be so unlucrative... Oops, be so disruptive to others' work."

""

"To get into the specifics anyhow, Yanei-san was reportedly a regular patron—but it seems she wasn't a dear guest."

She put it delicately, but agreed with him on this regard. The Nashorn staff who knew her did not outright insult a regular, especially one now deceased, but the nuance in their choice of words was apparent enough that it didn't need interpreting for Officer Tooasa.

Although a regular, she was not a guest of honor.

"She would shamelessly haggle to lower prices, often complain about the goods, try to make unreasonable returns... Well customers are only human, you know."

As somebody who ran her own agency, Kyouko-san could perhaps understand. Thinking of the outrageous requests the chief made of the Okitegami Detective Agency on a regular basis, Officer Tooasa could only bow his head in apology as part of the force—He would assume the forgetful detective did not remember every single one of them, but it must have left some impression. Maybe her memories reset day to day but experiences remain in a corner somewhere—maybe.

Being often mocked as a civil servant paid by tax, Officer Tooasa understood very well, if you didn't acknowledge that "the customer is God," you could hardly do this job.

"Annoying though she may have been, she wasn't so bad as to drive people to wish for her to cease to exist...still there was a reason that necessitated her death,"

Kyouko-san said, tapping her pen.

She'd been filling the empty space on the timetable with information about the victim's identity, but by now, the whiteboard that was her arm was nearly out of space.

"Necessitating... her death?"

It may be a so-called motive, but people are killed for reasons so trivial they couldn't conjure them up in their wildest dreams, so digging too deep here may prove to be a futile exercise—Some are killed for being wicked, some for being good—it's impossible to generalize. There may even be those who are killed simply because they are 'impossible to generalize'.

Besides, if only a few hours of hearing from a limited number of people were enough to judge her character and personality, the deceased would not be able to rest in peace.

As expected, Officer Tooasa's men were in the process of filtering through the victim's interpersonal relationships at home and work, and with this thought, he felt a twinge of guilt, as though he were slacking dining elegantly with Kyouko-san this evening. As part of his job, he realized anew that good progress had to be made from these talks.

"It could be a murder without motive, or it could be that the murderer did not mean to kill but the victim died as a result."

Kyouko-san further listed the possibilities.

"Yes... Or maybe a case of mistaken identity?"

Officer Tooasa ventured a hypothesis that he himself found unlikely, merely to pass the time—and after reacting to it with a "Mistaken identity?" Kyouko-san went on to say,

"Killed by mistake—interesting, it could be."

"Oh, could it be? Mixing up who to murder..."

"It's quite possible. She was said to have worn unusually large flatframed glasses—and in the heat of emotion, it's possible they couldn't quite make out who it was."

She said and touched her own glasses.

"Anybody would be tremendously nervous when murdering. When human life is on the line, people are prone to astonishing errors."

She spoke as if standing in the killer's shoes, something very difficult for Officer Tooasa as a policeman to do—the sole province of a private detective.

Remaining calm and rational was not easy when you can't afford to fail—though being wrongly killed would be the last thing anybody would want.

"But Kyouko-san. No matter what the motive was, you wouldn't want to commit murder in a busy store."

The conversation had come full circle, but this was still the bottleneck—it's easy to understand if it were an ad hoc crime in which somebody was struck while walking alone on a street at night.

"Particularly, assuming the reason for killing Yanei-san was her being a troublesome regular—which is to say, if we assume the murderer to be an employee, it makes even less sense. Few with any sense at all would think for a second to plot murder in their own territory."

Almost like the murderer saying, "Suspect me."

Even discounting that, when viewed as a matter of simple cost and benefit, the fact that a person met their demise within a high-end boutique, where the brand image is of paramount importance, could potentially deter the flow of customers. Should rumors circulate that somebody was bludgeoned to death with a hanger in the shop's fitting room (and they will), it could lead to the worst: bankruptcy. At minimum, it would simply feel unsettling to have your workspace become the scene of murder.

All harm and no gain.

If we were to, rather forcefully, entertain the idea that there might be a benefit in committing murder within one's own territory, the only conceivable upside might be a slight easing of nerves when embarking on such a grave endeavor.

Nevertheless, in Officer Tooasa's gut feeling it would still be more convincing if the culprit acted impulsively, without any thought, considering neither gains nor losses, merely that they ended up bludgeoning the victim.

"If there were other advantages to committing a crime in a familiar place,"

Kyouko-san said, offering a capped pen—from the look of it, she had already written down as much information as she could. She had indeed roughly reviewed what they had heard today—he took the pen, put it back in his breast pocket.

"Could it have been because meticulous preparations can be made in advance? Setting up mechanisms, making arrangements creating traps to kill the victim."

"Mechanisms... Locked-room shenanigans, huh?"

However, with regard to this particular murder, it was really difficult to imagine there being any large-scale contraptions behind it. It still gets hung up on there being too many witnesses. Somebody would have surely seen, what with eyewitnesses and ceiling cameras. Avoiding all was virtually impossible. Unnatural to leave to chance and impossible to do systematically—

The Little Prince says, "What is essential is invisible to the eyes." Yet Kyouko-san says, "What is visible to the eyes is also equally essential." If we were to extrapolate a "third rule of essentials" by analogy, it might be, "even unessential things can be invisible." Now if only someone had eyed the despicable villain—

"Even unessential things can be invisible to the eye—such a profound thought indeed. We often miss the crucial in crucial moments,"

Kyouko-san praised this strange thing.

"Speaking of which, a locked room featured at the beginning of The Little Prince, too. The sheep in the box..."

"Oh... now you mention it."

But Officer Tooasa did not nod in agreement as much as to say "now you mention it." In fact, interpreting that as a locked room was where his mystery-loving mind had led him.

"The sheep in the box though, is just like Schrödinger's cat, isn't it?"

Trying not to reveal his mild trepidation, he joined in the conversation so casually. At least Schrödinger's cat was a term more compatible with mysteries than The Little Prince.

'Haha. The Prince would cry if the sheep were dead—oh!'

Just when Kyouko-san looked to be laughing warmly along with their casual chitchat, she exclaimed an 'oh!' She clamped a hand over her mouth and, in the process, knocked over the demitasse of espresso she had been about to sip after the meal, in evidently the reaction of somebody who had just realized something.

"Wha—what just happened, Kyouko-san?"

"It, it's nothing."

"Nothing? That sure didn't seem like nothing."

"I said it's nothing,"

She repeated, taking another sip of her espresso, the first person he'd ever seen drinking a double-shot, black, no less.

"Erm... Kyouko-san. If you, you know, noticed something..."

"I noticed nothing. Nothing's come to mind, nor have I deduced anything. The mystery of the case is far from solved, and not one doubt or inconsistency has been cleared up." She declared with certainty.

Declared with too much certainty, in fact, that it was hard to believe a word she said. It was baffling how she could lie so blatantly.

"You've... solved the mystery?"

"I said I haven't. Ugh, I just can't make any sense of it. Now, it's getting late, about time to go home. Thank you for today, Officer Tooasa, the meal was delicious. I'll be looking forward to your future accomplishments."

Kyouko-san wiped the meticulously written timetable clean with a wet wipe, rolled down her sleeves swiftly, and made an all-too-obvious move to call it a night. She couldn't just leave like that.

It appears that she, who was only supposed to act as an interpreter, somehow ended up putting the pieces together due to Officer Tooasa's offhand remark. The relationship between the detective and the policeman, as embodied in detective novels, was unfolding—an unexpected turn of events, especially for the professional detective that Kyouko was.

If, however, she had in fact uncovered some truth, Officer Tooasa was in no standing to let that go unasked.

This was no battle of wits.

He wasn't that far gone to lose sight of his responsibilities.

He needed to hear her deduction as soon as possible to react appropriately—no matter how popular terms from detective novels such as 'locked room mystery' or 'impossible case' may become,

such words are powerless in the face of the reality of 'a murderer at large'.

"Oh dear, I'm in a pickle now, aren't I?"

With crossed arms, Kyouko-san showed a truly troubled expression.

"It is so very unfortunate I can't be of any help. This time I was only requested as an interpreter. I may discover the truth yet cannot grandstand with my deduction."

As apologetically as she said it, the underlying message screamed 'if you don't pay, the machine won't work' so stubbornly.

Or, considering her respect for professional ethics, perhaps this should be respected just the same.

In the first place then, it was Officer Tooasa who wanted to send Kyouko-san back home. He could have insisted on solving the case all on his own and turned away the detective. Unfortunately for him, these developments were unwelcome as well.

Had that detective been any other than Kyouko he would have seen them off here—But.

"Erm, how about we head to another place next? There's a quiet bar where we can sit down and talk things through."

He had no knowledge of any such quiet bar (that would be another one owed to his colleagues), and never in his life had he been so forward with a woman.

"Well for my part, I'd like to proceed directly to the station to receive my compensation, hurry home to bed, and completely forget about the truth I happened to piece together." As if he would let her forget so easily.

But she could do just that. The forgetful detective had that ability. To reset any deduction or culprit profile, erasing them from her mind—by tomorrow morning, she would have forgotten it all. If he did not ask her tonight, her deductions would vanish into oblivion.

"But then again, it is difficult to say no when you're so insistently invited. I will accompany you then. But—I will only provide some hints; if you could, based on these hints, make your own deductions, please do."

"Hints... huh?"

"Correct. Hints distilled from the information that anybody listening to witness accounts would know.

Hint number one: Numerous eyewitnesses saw the victim, Yaneisan, approaching the store about eleven AM. But when you organize the testimonies you find all the eyewitnesses were customers who came to shop at the time. Why do you think that is? Hint number two: Because Yanei-san never left the fitting room, staff suspected something was amiss, opened the curtain and discovered the body. But how did that staff determine Yanei-san had been in the fitting room all the time?

Hint number three: You cannot see inside the fitting room from outside, but can we say for certain you cannot see out from inside?"

"Err, uh, um..."

She talked so much and so fast that he wasn't able to catch the three at first, and had to count them off on his fingers to confirm what they were.

Hint #1: The biased eyewitness accounts—all who had seen Yanei Sashiko were customers.

Hint #2: Why did the first person to discover her notice something was strange in the fitting room?

Hint #3: You can't see outside from inside the fitting room—is this really true?

The first hint he hadn't realized until he'd been told, but looking back on it, it seemed to be accurate—we can't say for absolute certainty without listing the eyewitness testimony of all questioned. However, since the detective-turned-translator said so, well, it's probably the case.

As for hints number two and three, he already had some ideas. Staff had noticed after Yanei had been in the fitting room for a considerable amount of time. And you couldn't see outside from inside as you couldn't see inside from outside, right?

That must be all there was to it.

Officer Tooasa, who understood neither the mystery of the case nor the meaning of these hints, was hoping for a fourth hint, but it seemed to end at three.

"Now then, shall we be off?" Kyouko-san stood up to leave her seat. "Try unraveling these hints yourself, officer. Ideally by the time we arrive at the next venue—so that we may enjoy some light mystery discussion over drinks."

Contrary to her smile, he miserably failed to meet her expectations.

5

The upscale bar commanded upscale prices.

His subordinate's assumption turned out to be quite inconveniently costly. Not only had the bill from the Italian restaurant they had recently departed almost caused his eyes to pop out of their sockets, but this bar, despite being only a bar, appeared to be more expensive than a full-blown dinner.

Probably wouldn't be on the budget.

Which meant he would have to pay a hell of a lot of his own pocket. It felt entirely more unsuitable a place than he previously thought, but he was past caring at this point.

Despite Kyouko-san's Nashorn branded outfit also not quite syncing with the posh ambiance here, she didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"Oh, what a cute little bar!"

She was as giddy as a normal girl.

This detective, cute and charming as she was, could just as well be a devil in disguise. Tooasa had his doubts, having seen one too many colleagues get ahead thanks to her, though he tried not to show it. He couldn't help viewing them with a slightly contemptuous, grudging eye. However, he may have to reconsider such shallow thinking.

Thinking about the expense they must have incurred entertaining her, he almost felt sorry for them. Though here and now Officer Tooasa found himself in the same boat.

On the way here he had wracked his brains trying to gain some insight of his own, but nothing came to him. It was becoming apparent that he and Kyouko-san operated on completely different wavelengths.

Her hints were no help at all.

Maybe not at all—The hint about the eyewitnesses all being shoppers did suggest that none of the shop staff saw the victim come in. Clearly odd.

It's not impossible but you'd expect shop attendants to notice customers rather than fellow shoppers. They'd greet them as they entered, offer assistance with fashion choices—as it's a clothes shop.

The staff may have avoided or ignored the 'troublesome customer' Yanei Sashiko altogether. But still they must have noticed her presence in the first place. To actively ignore somebody, you must see them first.

None of the attendants spotted a regular and in some ways a memorable customer—why was this?—a big question mark.

What exactly this question mark meant, however, Officer Tooasa simply could not figure out.

As for hints number two and three, he was all but stumped. About the only conclusion he could draw was that fitting rooms in young women's boutiques harbor mechanisms yet unknown to middleaged men. In fact, there were a plethora of unfamiliar terms until Kyouko-san had translated for him—the presence of a mysterious paper intended to prevent makeup stains on the garments, for instance. Had he not been assigned to this case he might have lived his entire life without knowing.

"I concede. My hands are up. I'm just a cop sidekicking for you, so I implore you, Kyouko-san, let us all learn from the wisdom of a master detective."

Perhaps intoxicated by the steep cost of the alcohol, finally Officer Tooasa gave such a humiliating declaration of surrender.

"My, oh my,"

Kyouko-san said with an expression of shock.

"Try and hold on a little longer, would you? I enjoy it most when I'm sipping fine wine while watching men struggle."

A little devil she was.

"What a conundrum. You invite me for a meal, ply me with drinks, and officer, how I long to lend you a hand. Alas, I cannot work without compensation... Oh why, why didn't I charge you? Never have I felt such remorse for not taking money. Just imagine how amazing it would be if I had gotten paid! I yearn to aid the police so badly, yet here I remain, unfulfilled."

"Fine, I'll pay. Please, allow me to officially compensate you with an additional commission fee on top of the original. Consider it a personal commission from me." Prompted by the urging of the fastest detective, he finally gave in—making him suspect the chief had orchestrated this turn of events all along.

Regardless, he could only go along with it now.

The policeman's rivalry with the detective should never overshadow the urgency of preventing a murderer from escaping justice. A locked room murder was no form of entertainment.

Buying her food and drinks and now even paying her a fee—it was going to cost him an arm and a leg from the look of it. But anyhow, he decided it best to personally handle this as his final stand.

Strangely enough, despite having officially engaged her services and even promised to pay extra beyond the interpretation fee, Kyouko-san displayed only a faint reaction.

With the bar's atmosphere it wasn't surprising that she wasn't jumping for joy, but she appeared somewhat troubled upon his request.

"Mmmmm..."

She even shut her eyes as if deep in thought.

Could it be a misunderstanding on his part? Did she not expect to be asked for her services? Were her declarations of anticipation for his deduction genuine?

By the time late regret had seeped in and he felt he should have asked in a more formal manner, Kyouko-san, as if reading his concerns,

"Oh no, you've misunderstood,"

She said, waving a hand dismissively.

"My deductions are nothing more than brief flashes of insight. It just so happens that, in this particular case, my mind's light bulb flickered on a nanosecond before yours did. I genuinely appreciate your trust and respect in seeking my assistance, and it truly brings me joy to contribute to the police force in solving mysteries. However, there's a certain degree of trepidation, a nagging hesitation, when it comes to unveiling my reasoning. It pertains to personal... considerations. But it can't be helped, sadly. We cannot leave a killer at large now, can we?"

This is part of the job, she said.

Not explicitly, but her words conveyed to Officer Tooasa that she understood his intentions, which was gratifying. What concerned him, however, were the aforementioned "personal considerations."

What could possibly be the reason that would make this detective hesitate to reveal her reasoning? The immediate thought that crossed his mind was the possibility of an acquaintance of hers being a suspect. With the forgetful detective though, the concept of "acquaintance" didn't seem to apply.

For even if she became acquainted with someone today, she would forget them tomorrow.

Even if among today's eyewitnesses, someone had a past connection with her, she would have already forgotten that person. There shouldn't be any reason for her to hesitate pointing out the culprit. But if not that, then what other "personal considerations" had she?

"Right then, if we've decided, let's get to it promptly. It's getting late, we've had some drinks, and I'm feeling a bit drowsy, so best I begin solving this mystery while the deductions are still fresh in my mind."

Okitegami Kyouko, now in detective mode, with a dramatic look of seriousness—or not, she had the same relaxed air as before as she got down to business.

"First things first, the locked room."

6

"First things first, the locked room. Let us classify what sort of locked room we have here. Officer, being an avid reader of detective fiction, I'm sure you're familiar with the various types of them. But for the time being consider this my interpretation—bear with me."

And with these words, Kyouko-san rolled up her sleeves once again, again apparently planning to use her arm as a whiteboard. She took the ballpoint pen that Officer Tooasa held out in silence and began jotting down her 'hints'—much like an actual lecture.

"The most likely, or perhaps most popular, type of locked room is of Definition (i): a 'Locked Room Concealing Murder'. Trap the body where nobody can access it and the crime may escape discovery—you're safe. A variant is when a body is hidden in a locked room as far from sight and reach as possible by someone desperate to escape confronting the grim reality of what they've done."

No objection there.

Or rather, Officer Tooasa thought at first this was such a case—Although.

"Yes. I would think a fitting room doesn't serve much for coverup. You can hide it, say a couple hours at most—not exactly designed to conceal."

Kyouko-san wrote in fine print on her wrist: (i), and drew a double strikethrough on the words—and under it, (ii).

"Definition (ii): 'Coincidental Locked Room.' It's cases where the crime scene appears like a locked room due to a combination of factors of chance, not the culprit's intention."

A force of habit without any planning involved?

Happening to be a locked room by chance, the odds seemed low, but when viewed as the second-most popular option in reality—Well in reality, not in detective novels, criminals with the luxury of deliberately setting up locked rooms are but few.

This definition (ii) seems to be the most appropriate for this case from the discussion so far...

"Yes. In this case, however, it feels too convenient to be by chance. For now I suggest we put it aside and move on."

Kyouko-san wrote a (iii) below 'Coincidental Locked Room'— Judging by the space left, there would be five or six definitions total.

"Definition (iii): a locked room designed to simulate suicide. In the otherworldly realm of detective fiction, I'd venture to say this is the most common type of locked room."

"Yes, it is. The exclusion of other options makes it impossibly to think of anything other than suicide...There's no shortage of such locked rooms in mysteries."

Rather than that, it could be one of the ways in which the keyword "locked room" survives there. The inevitability of a secret room or such arises in its own way...and even the most outlandish locked room acquires a certain persuasiveness.

"But Kyouko-san, regardless of whether there's a criminal out there willing to go to such lengths, here it doesn't seem to apply. It's hard to believe the culprit tried to make Yanei-san's death look like suicide."

"Agreed. ...Incidentally, as a variation of this Definition (iii), you could also consider a locked room where the victim genuinely committed suicide. Mystery fans tend to look at cases from a skewed angle, but in normal terms, if someome appears to have died by suicide inside a locked room, usually that's what it is."

As she spoke, Kyouko-san crossed out Definition (iii) as well. Though it was none of Officer Tooasa's business, didn't she ever consider that her skin also needed care?

"Definition (iv): 'Locked room in the name of a locked room."

"What? What's that mean?... Something philosophical?"

"It's far removed from philosophy, rather a whimsical criminal act of fabricating a locked room just for the fun of it. Without real necessity or clear reason behind it, only the conception of a locked room trick that they then put into action. You could even call this the result of reading too many detective novels."

We should be cautious ourselves, said Kyouko-san—Hard to tell how serious she was being, but it was hard for the officer who had enlisted precisely due to an excessive habit of reading detective novels to write off the existence of such a person.

Just earlier, he had thought, 'that can't be' of a culprit who goes out of his way to create a locked room—a portrait of a criminal obsessively convinced that he must conceive a locked room when committing murder. Alternatively, the culprit could just be lumping 'creating a locked room' in with 'wearing gloves to avoid leaving evidence' or 'fabricating an alibi,' deeming it a required step in the crime process.

"Are we... setting this aside as well, Kyouko-san?"

"I think we can rule it out. A fitting room is too flimsy to be a locked room. If it wasn't for you and I being detective novel readers, we probably wouldn't have seen it as such at all."

Indeed, none of Officer Tooasa's colleagues had that impression of the case. They probably would have told him he was overthinking it.

"Put simply, that means the clues must be about there...that for some reason, the culprit had to make the fitting room into a locked room, specifically."

"Hmm..."

The story seemed to make sense and not make sense at the same time. In any case, Kyouko-san rejected Definition (iv) as well.

"What about Definition (v)? I sense we've reached a minority here, already at the fourth..."

Depicted as a pie chart, assuming the first definition accounted for eighty percent, the second ten percent, the third at most five percent...the fourth would be at most three percent.

Any locked rooms in the remaining two percent or less could be dismissed as aberrations, missing the mark by less than five percent could be casually brushed aside.

"Quite right. Though for mystery enthusiasts like myself, Definition (v) is the most tantalizing of all..."

After making such an ostentatious remark, Kyouko-san added,

"Definition (v): 'Impossible Crime Locked Room.' Creating a situation where the crime seems utterly impossible for anybody to commit, making it difficult to even identify suspects, let alone pin down the culprit, and intending for the case itself to become an unsolvable maze... Morality aside, you have to admit there's a certain criminal genius in designing the perfect locked room mystery."

"...This is different from Definition (iii), 'simulating suicide'?"

"Yes, different. Definition (v) vehemently refuses to be interpreted in a realistic manner—because it's impossible for anybody, it insists that it's impossible even for itself. There's a certain urgency to it... Hence, adding an exception to these five definitions, we have Definition (vi): 'Other Locked Rooms.'" Officer Tooasa scrutinized the whiteboard—Kyouko-san's arm—once again. The crossed-out definitions were difficult to decipher but not altogether unintelligible.

Definition (i): 'Locked Room Concealing Murder'

Definition (ii): 'Coincidental Locked Room'

Definition (iii): 'Locked Room Simulating Suicide'

Definition (iv): 'Locked Room in the Name of Locked Room'

Definition (v): 'Impossible Crime Locked Room'

Definition (vi): 'Other Locked Rooms'

...Nothing particularly original or novel in terms of mystery fiction, but comprehensive enough. Arranged in order of realism, it simplifies and sorts the types of locked rooms in a very understandable manner.

But the discussion would only be a lecture on mystery fiction if it ended here—the question is how these definitions apply to the case at hand.

"Barring one, three and four, our locked room must be either two, five or six."

"I think we can discount number six, 'other locked rooms', as that refers to the fantastical or 'locked rooms from another world'. For better or worse, our case lacks such fanciful surprises."

What exactly constituted a 'locked room from another world'? We can only imagine. A room of magic or curses? If so, it wouldn't even account for 1 percent of the pie chart. However, within the realm of detective fiction, which can be considered fantasy in its own right, such rooms might indeed exist.

Though some readers may complain...

"Then would it be Definition (ii) or Definition (v)?"

"Supposing there were no eyewitnesses, it is a locked room of Definition (ii)—this theory however does not allow for further investigation. Such a fluke would be all too convenient."

"But Definition (v) is 'impossible crime,' isn't it? Not just too good to be true; the complete opposite—it's impossible."

To create a locked room means the murderer deliberately intended to evade the staff, customers, and cameras—sounds impossible enough. Admittedly, nobody could pull this off.

"But what if this is exactly what the murderer wanted us to think. Put another way, to dismiss a meticulously crafted crime as mere 'coincidence' with a single word could be deeply displeasing for the culprit as well, don't you think?"

So allow me to present my theory—she said something which, from the culprit's point of view, was very much undesired.

The murderer most likely did not commit the crime whilst contemplating definitions of a locked room. Be that Definition (ii) or Definition (v), the optimal outcome for them was simply that the crime goes undetected.

"Speaking of which, Officer Tooasa, how far have you pondered the three hints I gave earlier? If there are parts that don't need explaining, I will skip those briefly."

"Oh, err, to be honest, I haven't quite... at best, I've only understood about half of the meaning of hint number one... Basically it's about

how odd it is for the clerks not to have noticed a regular customer, right?"

"Yes, that's correct. Excellent."

She praised him so yet he couldn't feel satisfied. He agreed something was odd but would be at a total loss if pressed to explain why.

"Don't be so modest. If you go back far enough, you will find that the answer is already there—none of the staff, not a single one, noticing Yanei-san, the regular customer, implies that none of them knew who she was. Those not acquainted with her were the ones who saw her."

Huh?

He was about to object to her leap in logic when she continued on,

"That is, no eyewitnesses recognized her. Their accounts only prove that a customer dressed in Nashorn's fashionable attire was present. It does not confirm that they saw her as herself."

"But—the CCTV footage..."

Caught her—from behind.

Considering she was wearing oversized glasses, CCTV footage alone might not suffice to positively identify her. The police therefore attempted to make a comprehensive judgement based on the collated eyewitness accounts—couldn't this confirm her arrival at the store at about eleven?

"Since eyewitnesses identified her solely based on her clothing and naturally, in a clothes store, people pay attention to what other customers are wearing."

"You, you're suggesting... they mistook someone else for her?"

Come to that, it had been suggested before.

Could it be that Yanei Sashiko was mistaken for someone and killed by accident—so went the unfounded hypothesis. Could he have guessed it right by chance?

"No, it's not so much a 'mistaken identity', I mean could it have been a 'different person' altogether....Now the police believe that Yanei-san was still alive at that time simply because so many people testified seeing her enter the store, correct?"

"Yes...eh? Are you saying she was already dead by that time?"

"Don't you think this fits better? I'd rather think that the victim was killed before she entered the fitting room than that she entered the fitting room and was killed there."

" "

It was only getting more confusing...

Basically, the Yanei Sashiko spotted headed to the fitting room, and the Yanei Sashiko found dead inside, were two different people? But then, where did the first Yanei disappear to?

"Well it is a fitting room. She could easily swap outfits. To witnesses, she was just clothes after all. Get changed, remove the wig and glasses, and she could boldly walk out a different woman—or rather, reveal herself as the actual woman."

"Just changing clothes is one thing, but taking off a wig too? It makes it sound like she was in disguise all along—"

It is very much disguise.

It does sound far fetched that somebody would just happen to be dressed identical to the victim. If the witnessed Yanei was an imposter, then it must have been deliberate disguise.

"But she couldn't just brazenly walk out, could she? If somebody who hadn't gone into the fitting room emerged from it, people would suspect something was amiss."

"Yes, let me explain that part last—to be honest, I still hope to borrow your wisdom by then."

What did it mean? She didn't seem like she was trying for secrecy, but really not confident.

"Let me first explain why this person was posing as Yanei-san. I didn't examine the scene myself, and most of this is just my own unfounded imagining...likely with many inaccuracies. Please verify the details later at your leisure."

"From here on, we'll simulate the actions of the criminal."

She said.

"First, the culprit called Yanei-san to Nashorn before opening hours. There, armed with malicious intent, they attacked her on the head with a prepared clothes hanger."

"Hmm... with malicious intent, huh?"

The part about it being before opening confused him, but his greater concern was the claim of intent. If they truly meant to kill, couldn't they have chosen a more effective weapon? Hadn't this been the prevailing theory up to this point?

"You could say it was precisely because they attacked with murderous intent that they were able to kill Yanei-san even with something as innocuous as a hanger,"

"So the murderer deliberately chose an odd murder weapon to make it appear impulsive, as you had implied initially?"

"More than that, I think it was to catch the victim off guard. If you're called out to a store before opening hours, you'd be on alert even if not expecting to be murdered. But clothes hangers are ubiquitous in boutiques, so it wouldn't arouse suspicion."

"...Why before opening hours?"

Satisfied for the moment regarding intent, Officer Tooasa still had doubts about timing.

"It is simply a matter of choosing a time when no one is watching. No customers naturally, and none of the staff had arrived yet either. The ceiling cameras, which run non-stop during working hours, would also have been switched off."

""

The ceiling cameras ran non-stop during working hours—which meant they were off at all other times.

The more he heard, the more inclined he was to believe it had been murder from the beginning.

Far from the impulsive, bewildered everyman Officer Tooasa first pictured, this was looking more like the work of a cold-blooded psychopath. However—

"Supposing that to be the case, the culprit must be a member of the staff? To be able to let the victim in before opening...But didn't you say it was unlikely for someone to commit murder on their own territory?"

For an impulsive 'crime of passion' territory is not an issue. But if it was premeditated, they probably wouldn't take such a high-risk, high-cost action. Unless they were an utter fool, they would weigh pros and cons—

"I'm sure the culprit had taken all that into consideration. Meaning, the benefits outweighed the risks and downsides, the murderer judged it to be worthwhile—'to make a killing in your own territory.'"

What's that? Advantages? A high risk, high reward deal? Well, of course, if you're going to go around killing people, you've already abandoned reason... but if you're going to do it anyway, there must be a reason...

Impossible crime.

Is it because Definition (v) makes it 'easy to create a locked room'?

"So let's say the murderer lured the victim out when there were no people or security cameras. Why specifically choose before opening? I'm asking, why not after closing?"

"Murder is possible anytime. But it does affect the estimated time of death. Were she killed late last night, even if the body had not been found until noon today, people would doubt it happened inside the fitting room."

"Right..."

It was a foolish question. There was a witness who placed the victim entering the fitting room about eleven o'clock and the body was found about noon, so it was natural to expect the time of death to be somewhere in between. The autopsy alone may widen the range some—still, a matter of some hours at most.

Some hours...? Where had he heard that?

"In other words, the murderer wanted it to appear that Yanei-san died in the fitting room...? And the murder didn't happen inside the room at all but elsewhere in the store?"

"Highly likely. The culprit murdered her somewhere else in the store, then moved the body into the fitting room before the staff had arrived. It is too implausible to commit murder in such a small room. With a knife or gun yes, but a clothes hanger..." When put that way, it really sounds like the common-sense answer.

Prior line of reasoning, 'it's theoretically possible, hence not impossible' seemed a bit of a reach in retrospect.

That the murder was committed not in broad daylight in a busy store, but in a store not yet open and where nobody was present, was most logical.

Accepting this line of reasoning inevitably raises another question that needed to be rethought: How come the murderer moved the body into the fitting room?

"As for how—well, plenty of ways to transport a body. Heavy as they are, the store has no shortage of trolleys for moving merchandise."

"I, I didn't mean how, but why... What could be the motive?"

He could understand, at a basic level, the desire to make it appear as if the victim had died inside. But the deeper reason for it eluded him.

"Let's continue tracing the murderer's actions. They carry the body in the fitting room before the other staff arrive—and draw the curtain behind them."

"Draw the curtain? From that moment on"

"That's right. This will do for the present, to hide the body."

For there was first the need to temporarily hide the body—said Kyouko-san. She was talking about fashion, and then murder and corpses, and her tone did not change. It caused Officer Tooasa faint cognitive dissonance. Discomforted him for sure, but now was not the time to fret over his feelings.

"Hide, hide the body? Keep it from being seen? But wouldn't that make this a locked room of Definition (i)? And flimsy as the fitting room is, you could only keep a corpse hidden for at most—"

—Some hours.

Ah, but she had said as much from the very beginning, hadn't she? Therefore the body must have been placed in Nashorn's fitting room some time prior to the shop opening for business.

Was it possible?

Wouldn't the body be discovered in short order, hidden as it was behind a flimsy curtain easily openable from outside? What if a suspicious clerk peeked inside before this?

"This is why you make sure the staff are occupied elsewhere and don't go near the fitting area. Or better yet, take on that area yourself and keep watch."

"So the killer must be someone with the authority to assign tasks and give orders. Someone able to monitor the scene."

"I believe so, yes,"

Kyouko-san nodded, and then,

"Which is why I'm in a bind,"

She said.

"? What do you mean you're in a bind?"

"Pardon me, thinking aloud. Anyway, they may buy some time before the shop opens—but only until then. Once customers start coming in, things get dicey. As their movements are unpredictable."

That was true too. And a sharp customer might grow suspicious of an unused fitting room and wish to investigate—or at least that anxiety factor can't be dispelled. You can't keep watching the fitting rooms and waiting to see how it goes.

"Quite. It was, ultimately, the lack of movement in the fitting room which led to the body being discovered. However, being discovered like this should also be within the murderer's plan—as long as it was not discovered between the shop's opening at ten and eleven o'clock."

This is where the earlier hint comes into play, said Kyouko-san.

"Hint number two. Why would the first discoverer, the staff, think somebody was dead in the fitting room? Hmm?"

"Well...because it was the only room where there was no movement, I suppose?"

"But the staff were not constantly monitoring the fitting room. In the blink of an eye, somebody else could have slipped inside unseen. But on what basis did they decide nobody had been in or out?"

When asked that, he began to think.

Like Schrodinger's cat or the sheep in the box, only God knows what went on in that unseen secret room—not to mention who was inside. Given this, how could anybody know for sure it was the same person, remaining inside the whole time...

"The shoes."

Once the idea struck, it all was a bit anticlimactic.

Naturally you remove your shoes before entering a fitting room. Kyouko-san had done the same, taken off her boots. As long as the shoes lined up outside stayed the same, it was only natural to assume it was still the same person inside.

"Exactly. And, conversely, swapping out the shoes every so often would give the impression the occupant was changing. For sure nobody would suspect there was a dead body inside the whole time."

This is how the culprit survived the first hour after opening—so she declared.

Shoes. They say fashion starts from the feet up, but it was a blind spot for a man like Tooasa.

"Nashorn stocks shoes as well, so the killer had plenty to work with. Shifting them slyly while avoiding notice, they could have kept up the ruse for an hour. Imagining the murderer furtively changing shoes to conceal a corpse is not exactly a glamorous picture, but in the context of a fashion boutique, tidying the shoes outside the fitting rooms would not rouse suspicion. That concludes phase one of the killer's plan. Phase two: sneak out through a back entrance, disguise themselves as Yanei-san, then sneak back in posing as a customer before the murder is discovered."

Kyouko-san evidently saw no need to explain further, but it was clear that being able to slip away from work whenever they wanted meant they occupied a senior position not bound by shifts.

"They didn't need Lupin the Third-level disguises. The impression made by the clothes is all that matters—not revealing their true identity is paramount."

"So they didn't wear the victim's clothes when disguising, they wore their own?"

"Correct. From head to toe she was dressed uniformly in Nashorn's—unlikely her own collection, since identical or similar outfits were readily available in-store. She would only have worn her own shoes."

[&]quot;Just shoes?"

"Yes. they would then creep into the store unnoticed—timing it to slip past the blind spots of staff. Even with multiple witnesses, they'd be invisible."

"Supposing the culprit was an employee, they'd know the camera positions and could instruct staff to avoid seeing the disguise. So the eyewitness accounts were biased—or rather, manipulated?"

Then at that point Yanei Sashiko was still alive. Fabricating misleading eyewitness information. Not seeing the culprit at all on camera would seem unnatural, so ensure a rear view is captured. Likely not so much difficult as brazen.

And the murderer entered a fitting room afterward? Seen by other customers—allowed to be seen.

But wait, that's odd. Being seen entering means the culprit, disguised as Yanei Sashiko, opened the curtain, exposing the victim's corpse inside to public view. Entering the room would be witnessed simultaneously with the body and would cause an immediate commotion.

"There was no commotion. The murderer entered the adjacent room, not the one the victim was in."

"The adjacent one?"

"Yes. The murderer changed back into themselves inside, then casually left the fitting room as if nothing had happened. Taking care to swap the shoes worn during the crime for those outside the next room."

Swapping shoes? To make it seem the victim's shoes had been returned? By taking the shoes worn for the disguise—the only

genuine item from the victim—and exchanging them with those of the adjacent room.

"I see. The fitting room the culprit was seen entering was made to look like the victim's, not where the body actually was. It was in the adjacent room from the start..."

Right, the uniform design of the six adjoining fitting rooms could make it tricky to distinguish the middle ones at a glance. A witness may have seen somebody dressed as a ceiling panel sneak inside, they likely weren't noting the exact location—and even if they did remember which room it was, such a memory would be overwritten by the shock of a dead body turning up.

"Come to think of it, you appeared concerned about the adjacent fitting room from the start, could you have noticed the culprit's scheme even then, Kyouko-san?"

"Goodness no. Don't be silly."

She denied it vehemently.

"I'm not that skilled a detective, really. You flatter me. While ending up in the wrong room proved a clue, that's about the extent of my deducing the culprit's actions. All that's left is returning to their duties and waiting for the body to be found. They shan't be moving those shoes left outside the fitting room, and discovery is imminent."

In fact, she was found within the hour.

The scene was this: Yanei, who had entered the fitting room, was bludgeoned and killed with a clothes hanger in a flash, the murderer was seen by anybody.

Such an inexplicable situation.

Or was it not so much inexplicable as impossible?

Impossible crime—locked room murder.

"Oh... wait a minute. I'm afraid you're wrong, aren't you?"

"Where?"

Kyouko-san blankly said back.

No chance she didn't know.

For Tooasa had already asked that very question, and all she had done was to put off her explanation.

"Walking in a dressing room then coming out looking different would naturally raise suspicion. Going in is one thing, you can disguise yourself however you like—Once you go inside, you can't keep track of who's where and what's going on. You might be seen coming out in disguise, or trying to swap shoes."

"So, if they were to exit when nobody is watching, there would be no issue, no?"

"Well, yes, but the question is how they would determine the timing of it..."

Ah. So this is hint number three.

Are we sure you can't see outside from inside a fitting room just because you can't see from the outside—but of all the hints, this was the least obvious.

It's not a magic mirror, and the curtain isn't see-through, of course.

With regard to that, Kyouko-san had told him something like, 'I'd like to borrow your wisdom," but he really didn't feel he had any wisdom to lend—or so he had thought, and upon hearing the rest, he saw that she was right in thinking that his input would be essential.

It was not so much that he was exceptional as the chief had praised—as that his memory was not wiped clean each day like hers was.

"Remember how we talked about why the murderer chose to commit the crime on their territory. High risk, high reward if there's something to gain?"

"I do, but... for now the advantage is, using their position to control the witnesses' view by half... But that alone feels weak. Only half the witnesses, not all of them. And besides, it's not like you can just walk out of the fitting room..."

"That's what I mean, the sheep in the box... Nobody could see what they were doing inside the fitting room for that brief time. They could be on the phone and nobody would know."

"...Phone? You mean, to contact people? Wait—there was an accomplice coordinating timing...?"

"Given the hustle and bustle, I don't think the culprit had an accomplice—moreover, the culprit had no need for an accomplice. They were not contacting, but receiving, don't you see? From the ceiling cameras."

"!"

CCTV feeds—beamed wirelessly to the cloud and accessed on office computers. Being stored in the cloud meant that footage could be viewed from anywhere—inside the fitting room on a mobile phone, just by knowing the account and password.

"Are you s-saying the murderer used security footage to commit the crime?"

"Yes. There are blind spots, and the front of the fitting rooms is one of them. But all the same, you can see the flow of people. Wait for a moment when nobody seems to be around the fitting rooms, then slip out and change the shoes."

Then, contradicting that earlier confidence,

"Would you be so kind as to enlighten me on whether such a thing is possible or not? You see, officer, until just now I had no idea about things like Wi-Fi and the cloud—I'd forgotten them."

She added on, making herself out to be some sort of technophobe.

Though really it wasn't technophobia, but amnesia.

But it is the mark of a great detective to include in her deduction what she did not know until moments ago—in contrast, having the same information and knowing it within the bounds of common sense, Officer Tooasa felt shame in never arriving at the answer.

He might be inclined to interpret the way she had asked him the question at the end as her saving face for him.

"If we're only talking about what is possible then yes, I think it's possible...I'm forced to say it would be pretty vicious, though."

Using security cameras not for security purposes, but to monitor the movements of witnesses is unethical, as is controlling the movements of the staff and utilizing the number of witnesses as elements to construct a locked room. But removing morals from the equation, the culprit's rationale for choosing their own workplace as the crime scene made sense, suppossing they had access to the camera footage. Taking advantage of the belief that you can't see out from inside the locked room—

"...Wait. Huh? Doesn't that mean...we've already identified the culprit?"

"Yes, it rather does."

At his naive and belated question, Kyouko-san nodded.

"You did say, officer, that the manager controls access to the networked camera footage. Therefore, if this deduction is correct, the culprit would be Nashorn's manager."

The more intricate the scheme, the more evidence would be left behind for the culprit to explain away later. This was a prime example. There was no definitive proof yet, naturally, as the detective herself acknowledged...that would have to come next. Along with investigating the relationship between the victim and manager, they'd need to question the suspect directly, as a suspect this time, not witness. It was already late, ideally they should do so tonight, without delay—

"Ah. That does follow, doesn't it."

"?"

She had a glum face. Looking unlike a detective who had just solved the mystery—which, come to think of it, Kyouko-san wasn't keen on solving it from the start.

"Is something the matter? As for the reward for solving the mystery, you can rest assured that I will pay you handsomely."

"I'm sure you will,"

He was told once and for all.

Feeling pressed by her, he added, "It's just, when I go to question the manager, I would like you to be my interpreter again..."

Officer Tooasa had already gained some familiarity with fashion terminology, but the interrogation would be quite involved. To take responsibility for deducing such complexities, he felt it imperative that Kyouko-san attend the questioning as well.

Partly to avoid any unsavory sense of hogging the limelight by going it alone. But more pressingly... Kyouko-san's dedication to police work was so extraordinarily high he'd assumed she'd unquestioningly acquiesce to join him. However, she was hardly so enthusiastic:

"Well I suppose it's come to this."

"Eh? Do you mean to say that you'll charge me extra for interpreting?"

"I wouldn't be so mercenary,"

Assured Kyouko-san.

She was mercenary enough as it was.

"It's more of a personal reason, you see."

"Personal reason?"

"I confess, I've become quite the fan of Nashorn fashions. It would be... awkward to interrogate and denounce the store manager as a suspect. If the boss is arrested, the shop would have to close down."

" "

Well, these were her deeply personal considerations.

Trivial as it seemed to the fashion-oblivious Tooasa, to Kyouko-san—still dressed in Nashorn clothes—it may be a matter of life and death. Perhaps not unlike police officers being unable to investigate cases involving family.

"Even when translating your conversation with the manager today, I was so nervous that I kept asking questions that had nothing to do with the case."

Though it was problematic to confess such a thing only now, equally problematic would be her compromising future interviews—as it was an emotional issue though, Tooasa wondered what could be done.

"So here's what we'll do,"

She said without a moment's hesitation.

She had weighed her work against personal considerations and chosen work, it seemed.

"Please allow me a moment to rest, a bit of a nap before we question the manager." "A... nap?"

"Yes. To reset my memories of today. What I've seen, what I've heard, the people I've met, the fashions I've come to love."

Presumably to aid her descent into sleep, the forgetful detective ordered another round of alcohol. Then with a smile free of doubt:

"With recollections and sentiments reset, we may approach the interrogation afresh."

7

Kyouko-san first collected her investigation fee down to the last penny. She then took a brief nap, and on waking no longer a fan of Nashorn's fashions, she once again accompanied Officer Tooasa to question the store manager, acting as interpreter and bridge for communication—or, in effect, dealt with the manager alone.

She had, as a matter of course, lost all memory of the case as well as of Nashorn's boutique, but the locked room lecture notes written on her left arm proved useful—Grasping the ins and outs of the case centered around six definitions, and conducting the same reasoning leading to the same conclusion, Kyouko-san viewed the manager she had met earlier that day as a "total stranger I've never met once in my life" whom she grilled without mercy and with a smile on her face.

The one who remembers nothing—is I.

As a result, the manager not only confessed but revealed in minute detail the motive behind Yanei Sashiko's murder—enough for an arrest warrant, though evidence was still pending.

Before exact evidence had been gathered, the ability to disarm her opponent and, with nothing more than clever and skillful leading questions, extract unreserved admissions, is indeed a technique worth learning by the police force. Yet, Kyouko's composure and

eloquence suggests something that Officer Tooasa felt he could "absolutely never master."

Technique, and even more out of reach is the mindset.

She did not hesitate to reset everything for the execution of her duty, not only memory but her emotional being. She went far beyond the norms of professionalism and discipline.

Willing to let go of even the things she loved, even the very emotion of "love" itself, if it became a hindrance in her pursuit of the truth.

If this was what it meant to be a detective, then try as he might for the rest of his life, Tooasa knew he would never make a detective. If it had to be this way, he was content with being the cop for life.

Feeling he could never achieve what she had, yet also profoundly knowing he never wanted to—at the very least Officer Tooasa would never forget that 'first meeting' gaze with which Kyouko-san had looked at him after waking.

He had seen what he should not have seen.

That's how a witness must feel.

...On a tangential note, the issue arose of what to do with the Nashorn clothing purchased for Kyouko-san. Naturally before the second round of interrogation—before she slept to reset her memory, Kyouko-san had changed out of them. Having worn them once, they could not be returned, and considering how she came to remove them in the first place, it's fair to say she would feel uncomfortable simply taking them back. But it was equally implausible for Officer Tooasa to take possession of clothing she had already worn.

"Guess the only option's to bin it?"

A bit of a waste. But then again, given she was said to never wear the same outfit twice, he supposed it couldn't be helped, when,

"But the clothes have done no wrong."

Kyouko-san presented a compromise,

"If there comes a day where I have the pleasure of working with you again, might I request you gift them to me once more, Officer Tooasa?"

"I... don't quite follow your meaning?"

"For—on the day I've forgotten that I've forgotten, I'm sure I will fall in love with it all over again."

Chapter 3:

Miss Kyouko's Cipher Table

1

Marui to shikakui ga nakatagai Gyakusankakukeidewa nare nareshii Chokusennaraba natsukkoi

The round and square are at odds Inverted triangles are overly familiar While straight lines are attached 2

The criterion of right and wrong is no different from a code—this is often what Yuinouzaka Nakoudo pondered, how earnestly he wished that someone would sort out the 'good' and the 'bad' in a neat little list.

If he went around bragging about such things, he might well get told off with "Can't you even tell good from bad on your own?!" And even if told off for that, it would only be after he had been shouted at that he would realize, "Oh, so that's something I shouldn't say." Objectively, just because you had been scolded, it does not necessarily follow that the scolder was right. They may be loud-mouthed and more precisely defined in where they want to stand, nothing more—everybody knows that what is right is not determined by how loud you are, nor is goodness determined by how strongly it is championed. This is anything but a criterion.

So what is the criterion?

Much as Yuinouzaka craves for one, there still is no such decoder ring in this world capable of translating 'right' and 'wrong' into common sense and nonsense—The accusation of "common sense should be enough to judge these things" is essentially based on certain empirical rules, and he is not yet stubborn enough to deny it out of hand. But when you think about it further, the line between common sense and nonsense is pretty arbitrary.

It is not uncommon for what is a friendly greeting in one culture to represent provocation in another; in cases like that, even devoid of malice, the action will be judhed 'wrong'. Bypassing for the moment the debate whether the fault lies in the improper conduct or in ignorance—he just couldn't suppress his yearning to to take inventory of the judgement itself.

True, if it were a matter of greeting ettiquete, body language, or word choice, then we can chalk it up to cultural, geographical, or customary differences. But if everything could be so easily explained, then it would all be trivial knowledge of life or jests that could be laughed off.

But there are cases where a joke just won't do.

Still unwritten cultural rules may allow wriggle room for ambiguous smiles in Japan and shrugged shoulders in the West, but what if it were codified in law?

The statute books.

In a sense, it may be a catalogue of good and evil, a sort of Rosetta stone for deciphering right and wrong, just what Yunouzaka had sought—but in fact, if you actually read the whole of the Six Codes of Law, you find that interpretation of the law is infinite.

Law itself is, for the most part, highly encrypted text—entirely different, diametrically opposed meanings can be derived from the same article, with experts in courtrooms then debating 'which is correct.'

It is certain that if we leave no room for interpretation, we run the risk of making our rules rigid and dead, but on the other hand, the very diversity of interpretation means that if we insist on a strict interpretation of the law, there will be a contradiction in saying that not a single person is not a criminal—there is no one alive who has not committed a crime—perhaps this should already be common sense.

It is said that you should read the intention of the law, when it was enacted, rather than the words of the law itself, but the so-called "intention" still seemed to him to be of obscure and elusive countenance. To pinpoint the crux concretely, it would be easier to understand through an analogy. In football, for example, people often say that the reason offsides is a foul is because it is "despicable, unsportsmanlike". But if offside is unsportsmanlike, then an offside trap is even more so.

There is deliberate misuse of the law—more extremely, abuse—here and there. Beyond the illogical, some articles are downright absurd, and, if only looking at the intention, appear to be either mistakes or private whims of past regimes masquerading as 'moral standards'.

Then legislation is far removed from justice and equity.

That is to say, it is a statute, in other words, a code, and not necessarily a moral or ethical code, as the case may be—but it is also true that when you try to do good, rules and customs get in the way.

That being the case, statute books would be more akin to poetry than narrative—let interpretation fall to the reader. Still, if all the statute books were collected into one codex, there should not be an infinite number of meaning and contradictions—in reality, however, a statute book is not one volume.

Multiple texts cover the same ground. Even domestically, this happens, and venturing overseas reveals a vast number of alien cultures.

In Japan, for instance, it is illegal to sell rulers in inches, an imperial unit. The urge arises to ask—what could possibly be wrong with that? Yet through reading of the law as it stands, by not conforming to the metric standard, inch-unit rulers violate the principles underlying the law and are essentially 'wrong'—despite being commonplace in countries using imperial over metric.

Well this is just about rulers, so I suppose you could call it peaceful—but the reason I can't let this rest is because the same could be said about firearms.

If you owned a gun in Japan, you'd be accused of lacking common sense or propriety; you'd be regarded as a potential killer first and foremost because you possess an instrument of murder. But in overseas countries where ownership is not prohibited, it is a perfectly normal means of self-defense. Not blame whatsoever—not a matter of legal interpretation.

Bringing up something dangerous like guns is extreme and arguably underhanded. But to illustrate, medical technology makes a clearer example—some surgeries are possible and some drugs usable in some countries that are not in others. Noble acts to save lives overseas would be prosecuted as assault domestically—a ridiculous contrast of non-fiction without embellishment.

This is, of course, a contradiction and a mistake, to be sure, but, of course, when you look at it this way, the distinction between "good"

and "evil" becomes much more blurred—in some cases, even reversed altogether.

In the past, what was good has become bad, and what was acceptable has become unacceptable—with the advent of new technologies, new laws are prepared to govern them. People used to insist on obeying laws that are unreasonable and illogical by today's standards—laws that we wouldn't dream of enforcing, even as a basis for good and evil.

All the same, Yuinouzaka would like to hold out hope for the existence of something akin to 'human nature' running through the entire course of human history, if at all possible. Yet this too was pretty suspect—There were times when inhumane slavery was considered natural, and heroes were those who killed many. Asking someone's 'favorite warring states general' was to Yuionouzaka little different than asking their favorite mass murderer. If you read the past with modern sensibilities, you will find that every hero, every great man, has feet of clay.

History textbooks get rewritten one after the other.

So what was the history he learned even about? Just a test of memorization?

However, there are those immutable textbook entries that refuse to budge—mainly in math and science. One famous example is that electricity flows from plus to minus—in fact, it flows from minus to plus, but the original definition still holds good and is taught as 'fact' simply because of its long history—too ingrained to change? Or is it, frankly, an unwillingness to admit error on the vertical axis of time?

Mathematics, it's said, is unchanging across cultures, even planets. Extremes exist to prove otherwise. Identical answers can have entirely different processes—the nines tables in Japan and India are worlds apart. The 'invention' of zero was a seismic shift, and maths before and after almost separate disciplines.

Progress means change, and change may involve the rejection of the past—the rules of right and wrong are constantly in flux. What starts out as an ant soon becomes a grasshopper, often in a much shorter timeframe than we'd expect.

Incidentally, if he had to pick a textbook subject where interpretation was most ambiguous, it would be literature. Given that the source material is inherently subjective text, there's ample room for interpretation.

It's a tired old trope, but on exam questions asking to decipher the author's feelings in a certain passage, even the author themselves may not have a definitive answer. And that's not to say their interpretation is the absolute truth anyway—once published, the meaning is largely left up to the reader.

"Feelings" aren't so clear-cut, are they? If you mean the literal meaning of the words, then the answer is no, it's not right or wrong, it's just vague. Like the meaning of "wind from an empty cave."

Like the explanation of "you have another think coming."

Like "the drinker's mind is not on the cup," and so on.

However much one might deplore the corruption of language and insist on dictionaries as absolute authority, one bump against the incongruity that even within the same language category, archaic and modern writings have entirely different meanings for the same words. For example, the words 'akarasama' or 'tokimeku' are acceptable, while informal grammar is nitpicked as ungrammatical.

When Yuinouzaka grew to adulthood and read in a book that there was indeed no correct stroke order in Japanese characters, he was genuinely shocked to the core.

'Do this.' 'Don't do that.' 'That's wrong.' Adults dictate children on the basis of groundless assumptions and mere outcomes of personal imaginations, then the educators and the educated are all fools. There is nothing more pathetic than this—true of education and sport alike.

Those of Yuinouzaka's generation have been relentlessly drilled in rabbit jumps and other callisthenics—he does not quite understand why—and there seems to be a heated debate about whether or not such exercise is appropriate. In truth, dissent has always existed, it has only now bubbled to the surface. As with slavery in ancient times, there were objectors even then.

There are always many ways of thinking and interpreting. It's maddening even that their public expression can be restrained by law. On the other hand, laws that are meant to promote good and prevent evil can themselves become the very evil they are meant to prevent. How can that be? If one man kills, he's a criminal, but if a million kill, they're heroes. Save one life and you're a hero, but save a million and you're a traitor—and such? Too much of a good thing is as bad as a bad thing—it hurts many and loses much.

As history has proven time and again.

Not that Yuinouzaka's lofty musings would be met with more than dismissal: "That's so obvious that there's no point in even bringing it up." —vertical and horizontal, that's just the way it is, and anyway, if the times change but the rules don't, it's the other way around that's really strange. He is old enough to know this without it being spelled out for him. But adulthood brings an appreciation of that additional axis.

Suppose X is the horizontal axis and Y the vertical axis, then we have the supposed Z axis—even when doing the same thing at the same time and place, the judgment may vary.

Call it personality, call it character.

Even for the same thing, some may be forgiven while others are not—much like how the same text can be interpreted in different ways, things that should have been unacceptable become the norm.

This whole business about the Z-axis, as it were, troubled Yuinouzaka more than anything else—murder being weighted by criminal motives and circumstances—how can this be? Voicing that doubt while unable to call for uniform justice troubles his reason further. Lesser sentences for minors committing the same crime, nations sparing the elderly prison. No acts or crimes are precisely the same, so judgement allows for circumstance. Even "good" differs in deed by the doer's past. It's unfortunate, but it's the way things are.

There is no difference between good and pretended good, some would argue, and yet at the end of the day, in this world it is hypocrisy that is condemned. In such considerations, one might wonder if there truly is any substantial difference between 'good' and 'bad'—any deed can be 'good' for ome, or 'bad' for another. Can anybody live without inconveniencing others? By the same token, regardless of who we are, just by living, we might be saving somebody.

Or.

It could be argued it is only with death that some individuals contribute to humanity. If believing justice always prevails would be naive, then surely so too is claiming that the victor represents justice.

Right and wrong—they really are one and the same.

By twisting logic to such convoluted, obstinate extremes, Yuinouzaka Nakoudo could finally rationalize that there was no ethical conflict in murdering his longtime friend and business partner Fuchibuchi Yoshitoshi.

Killing his good friend—was the 'right' thing to do. He at last, with great difficulty, succeeded in this belief.

3

All had been going well.

There was no reason that Yuinouzaka's company, "Enmusubito" shouldn't continue to thrive. He was feeling quite pleased with himself for showing the world such an innovative new business model ahead of the times. In fact, he had been receiving a fair amount of media coverage—but no matter how many successful entrepreneur interviews he gave, Yuinouzaka didn't let it go to his head, and even if he was a little cocky at times, it was within acceptable limits.

Enmusubito's business—in plain terms, it was a matchmaking agency. Clients would come to them with requests like "I'd like you to introduce me to someone like this..." and their job was to get clients connected with someone as close to their specifications as possible. Whether the client was asking for an elite or a specific individual, for a vague idea or anything at all, they would pull out all the stops to make it happen. Connect the dots, as it were—part of the inspiration behind the company name Enmusubito ("tying bonds").

Technology is advancing by the day, so personal connections are more important now than ever before. That's why he set up a networking company. It paid off, although in the early days they struggled to convey the vision and were written off as just another recruitment agency or dating service. Yuinouzaka himself found it challenging to articulate his ambitions in words. It had always been merely intuition.

What if the leaders of Company A and Company B—totally unrelated—became friends, would that spark something new? Or what if he brought together this pure literature author and that gag manga artist—like a sewing machine and umbrella on an operating table—and they inspired each other? What kind of works might that produce? Or even more extremely, if this celebrity and that politician who would never normally cross paths somehow got together, couldn't they leverage that connection for mutual gain?

It started as fanciful daydreams like that. What chemical reactions might occur if he brought together two parties who would never normally meet? Explaining that vague curiosity in a logical, systematic way was incredibly difficult for the highly intuitive Yuinouzaka. So having a good friend who understood what he wanted to achieve without needing it spelled out was invaluable. He believed friends were what you should hold dear.

That good friend was Fuchibuchi Yoshitoshi.

Yuinouzaka and Fuchibuchi founded the company together, just the two of them. Nowadays it's grown into a decent sized organization, but it started from humble beginnings. The name 'Enmusubito' was formed by combining parts of their own names, almost like a symbol of their partnership. Nominally Yuinouzaka was the president, but it was Fuchibuchi who took his vague ideas and turned them into concrete reality. More than business partners, Fuchibuchi was something of a benefactor to Yuinouzaka. A friend and benefactor. That's why it pained Yuinouzaka so deeply to be asked to kill him.

Was it not reprehensible on the part of a human being?

Was there no other solution?

Couldn't he still turn back?

His conscience told him to act with common decency and wisdom, but Yuinouzaka was a man of instinct, and ultimately he would follow his gut.

He had twisted the simple truth that murder is wrong into a coded rationale that killing Fuchibuchi was right. In truth, he reckoned, the real villain was Fuchibuchi, not him.

Fuchibuchi was no saint, objectively speaking—no man is without flaws. And by any measure, his past actions constituted a grave crime that flew in the face of Enmusubito's philosophy. If word got out it would decimate the company's reputation, and no doubt Yuinouzaka as president would go down with it.

In order to protect the company, Yuinouzaka had to eliminate his friend and benefactor, Fuchibuchi. When the time came, the conflict that should have been there was gone, leaving him with a sense of mission that was odd.

He may have succeeded in changing his mindset, but if you judge him normally, he was only covering up one crime by committing a worse one, so he had lost his mind completely—otherwise, he would have lacked the capacity to bludgeon a man's head. No.

He failed all the same—For all his rationalizations and resolutions, doubt remained.

He hesitated to kill his friend.

He faltered at severing a bond that had been essential to founding a company predicated on human connection—now deemed unnecessary and even detrimental. Human values don't shift so easily, yet for the victim Fuchibuchi, this hardly offered any salvation.

If anything, hesitation made things all the more cruel and wretched for the one about to die. The uncertain blow to the head fell just a little short of killing him outright.

Watching his friend writhing on the floor, bleeding from the head but still alive, Yuinouzaka instantly knew he'd botched it. Part of him thought he should finish him off, another part thought he could still call an ambulance and pretend this never happened, but the latter feeling was immediately denied.

At the moment when he bludgeoned him, he was no longer friends with the man who had been his friend, Fuchibuchi Yoshitoshi—no saint that he was, he would never forgive Yuinouzaka for that. The blow may have cracked his skull, but it shattered their bond too. In effect, his choices were reduced to two: guilty of attempted murder or murder itself, and he concluded that there was no going back once he had eaten his words.

It was a foregone conclusion that he would come to that conclusion—and if it was, he should have finished the job sooner rather than later.

A selfish thing to say after pushing him to the brink of death, but in Yuinouzaka's mind it's his most frank feeling.

It was the 'good thing' to beat to death the friend he never wished to strike, he was sure. But in the end, he didn't carry out his good deed.

The old friend lay dying, and he watched him die, from beginning to end, from end to end—not out of some noble desire to witness the end (that would be grotesque selfishness, not grace, if so), or even common humanity, but simple hesitation to draw the nail in the coffin.

It was that the dying Fuchibuchi began scrawling letters on the floor, with the blood flowing from his own head wound.

Dying message, as it were.

(*Ergh...*)

Yuinouzaka looked at his state—speechless.

Being no great reader of detective fiction, still Yuinouzaka knew what a dying message was, and, as the culprit, logically he should forbid such a thing at all costs.

It was originally a frame-up to make it look like a break-in robbery, a random robber happening upon the unsuspecting houseowner, who just happened to be there, and killing him in the process—no sloppy plotting there. Erasing his own presence from the scene was Yuinouzaka's only concern.

Therefore, even more he could not let Fuchibuchi leave any message. Even if he did not directly write "the murderer is Yuinouzaka", as soon as he left words that could subtly hint at this, it would soon expose everything. When Yuinouzaka realized the dying old friend seemed to be writing something, really he should have ended it there and then.

But.

(*Guh... Ergh...*)

He couldn't kill him. Couldn't bring myself to kill him.

If, in fact, it had been his intention to write down the name of Yuinouzaka or blatantly hint at it, Yuinouzaka could hardly have hesitated—all reason and sense should have been thrown out the window in favor of primitive survival.

But it wasn't.

For what the victim wrote with trembling fingers was:

"The round and square are at odds Inverted triangles are overly familiar While straight lines are attached"

(.....)

And with that, his old friend breathed his last.

He couldn't have ended him.

Even straining every sinew, the dying message seemed to have no end in sight, so anxious was he that the victim was meaning to write his name, which the victim was not, and so he did not move.

He couldn't move.

The cryptic words had him paralyzed.

This was no death poem¹ of five-seven-five-seven-seven.

No one is in habit of writing with their finger, in blood, least of all Fuchibuchi on his deathbed, so his penmanship could only be described as ugly, and Yuinouzaka could barely make it out, not even sure he could read the few complex kanji correctly.

But, what was written, was written—and he couldn't make head or tail of it.

The words made sense, but not the meaning behind them.

It was like parsing a complicated legal document without any reference point.

...The dying message was, of course, encrypted, so that even if the criminal found it, he couldn't tamper with it; this was a standard format for a detective story, and being a lukewarm reader, Yuinouzaka thought it a waste of time.

Whether encrypted or not, the culprit would be sure to erase any suspicious note from the victim. But when he actually found himself face to face with the situation, he couldn't bring himself to erase the bloody message written on the floor.

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¹ Jisei: Japanese death poems composed on the verge of death, encapsulating reflections on life's transience and mortality.

Such a cover-up operation, of course, left a trail of new evidence—But that was, if anything, an afterthought. It is quite possible that the encrypted message left here could be identifying him in code, any person would think that, 99 out of 100 times, and he should fix his mind on that as a rule of action. But he couldn't help thinking about the one chance in 99 that remained to him—just maybe.

(Sure, decoded, it might reveal my name—but maybe...) (Maybe this could be the combination to the safe?)

The safe combination.

A number with twenty-five digits, and motive for murder.

4

The follow-up is that things did not turn out the way Yuinouzaka wanted them to—both mercifully and inconveniently so.

Merciful was there being less regret than expected over the act itself: killing a friend of many years with his own hands. Though resolved this was the only way left and prepared for the consequences, Yuinouzaka could imagine to be tormented by intense remorse afterwards. After killing someone far closer than his now-estranged family, how could he possibly maintain normal emotions? He presumed that after that fateful night, Yuinouzaka Nakoudo would become an entirely changed man.

But nothing of the sort happened.

He found himself, to his surprise, much the same as he had always been—a letdown of sorts. All the agonizing leading up to the act now seemed almost unreal as though it had never happened at all. The struggle to carry it out was like a lie—easier to conceive than to perform—and yet Yuinouzaka wondered if he had been melodramatic about the whole "murder" thing.

In fact, for him, "murder" was something he had only heard of on television, so it wasn't surprising that it'd seemed dramatic, but in reality, when he actually did it himself, the act was just that—an act, and nothing more.

He pursued what he believed righteous, what he deemed good. And he should not have a moment's regret.

Killing a person did not change his inherent quality. Yuinouzaka may have been that kind of man all along—a man who could kill without a blink of his eye and go on being himself.

Even so, even discounting all this, it may be said that he was able to keep his self on the grounds that he had things on his mind before regret could set in—chiefly, that he had been left a dying message by his friend.

The inconvenient misstep that went not as planned, was in regards to that message. Yuinouzaka, despite his aims, left the death scene just as it was, the message still scrawled across the living room floor, neither erased nor smeared,. He did not photograph or transcribe the slightly lengthy text, it was not so much he could not memorize it. With this in mind, he ought not to be careless and leave any evidence behind, lest, in the future, said evidence becomes incriminating.

In any case, decrypting the cipher was beyond him, being a man of emotion and intuition. Puzzles and riddles were one thing, but he really did not credit himself with the ability to decrypt ciphers.

Thus, he decided, let the experts handle it.

—The experts.

On the spur of the moment, Yuinouzaka—a criminal himself—resolved to leave the matter to the experts of law enforcement.

He had taken the valuables from the scene and staged a robberymurder. It was inconceivable that the police would not come to talk to Yuinouzaka, a friend and a partner in the business, when they were investigating the robbery and murder, and who was the last person to see the victim alive. Then there will be time to turn the questions back on them.

The fact that Yuinouzaka valued human connections meant had no qualms about seeking advice from others when he felt out of his depth—and the police, now his sworn enemy, were no exception.

This, however, was where he miscalculated.

A development entirely unforeseen—what he feared most was that the deciphered message would turn out to point at him. It could work out this way, surely, so he was prepared for that eventuality—Ciphers can be interpreted countless ways and so even if one among countless interpretations brought up his name, he was confident he could find an alibi.

Of course, it was a big risk, but what he wanted was something with a chance in a million—if there was only a remote possibility that the police would be able to guess the twenty-five digits, he was prepared to leave judgment to the police unhesitatingly.

But reality was otherwise.

Just as he had overdramatized murder, so he overemphasized the importance of dying messages. In short, the police were not very interested in the dying message left by the victim, Fuchibuchi.

At first, he was afraid it was being kept secret even from related persons—as "information only the culprit knows" when questioned. As for that, well, he had imagined that as the obvious suspect, but it turned out that wasn't the case—he was racking his brains to

think of a way to turn on the tap without being suspected or looked askance at, when—

"Oh hey, Yuinouzaka-san."

The police officer who visited the firm, one Donma with a fitting pair of square spectacles, nonchalantly—as if merely in passing—raised the subject.

"It appears Fuchibuchi-san left behind some writing. Any clue what it's about?"

(That's what I was gonna ask you...)

Bracing for an interrogation, it turned out not to be one. When he replied that he had no idea, no inkling of what it was about, the man simply said,

"Well, it's not a big deal, really..."

And withdrew all too easily. While trying to remain calm in the face of the disparity in their attitudes, Yuinouzaka continued answering his questions. In doing so, he began to understand where the officer was coming from—the degree of importance they placed on the dying message was starkly different from his own. In hindsight, it was only natural.

In the world of detective fiction, the dying message is often the sort of decisive evidence and damning proof for the culprit. But it is not the culprit's evidence, it is the victim's. Just as a confession alone cannot identify the culprit, so a victim's testimony alone cannot determine the identity of the killer. Granting that the victim had left a message saying "the murderer is Yuinouzaka," that would not be enough to convict him.

There are practical problems, too, as to how much reliance can be placed on his dying message, written at the very end of his life, when his mind was in its most disordered state, without having to prepare such a one-size-fits-all excuse as "infinity many interpretations."

At worst, it is a breeding ground for false accusations.

So the police, while not ignoring the dying message, were content to put it on the back burner—if it meant anything at all, they would have to ask the arrested criminal about it later.

What optimism it was, something bordering on righteous indignation at this complacency from the authorities was bubbling within Yuinouzaka, but, putting personal feelings aside, he was beginning to feel the same way.

True, the odd cipher clue surfaces amidst real criminal cases broadcast on tabloid shows now and then, but he couldn't recall a time when a code of any sort had played a part in solving the crime. The usual result was amateur and expert alike proposing interpretations and analyses, only to conclude there was little meaning to be found. Codebreaking being the key was a thing of the past, from wartime.

In view of cost-effectiveness, it was obvious that the dying message was not only meaningless, but also lacked evidence, and the police had no time to waste on it.

As a directly affected party however, he couldn't detachly weigh up the cost. Some things you simply cannot calculate dispassionately.

Whatever the outcome, he wanted them working to break it—even if it spelled his own name. That alone was enough to prove he was no criminal driven to murder under the influence of detective novels. There's no such detective novel where the culprit goes to the police and says, "You must decode this dying message at all costs." Nonetheless, Officer Donma seemed to have dismissed him as an incorrigible mystery buff anyway.

A monumental mistake on his part, but it was this mistake that would set him on a new course.

For better or worse...

"Would you like me to refer you to an expert, Yuinouzaka-san?"

Said Officer Donma, looking wearied.

Refer him?

It was his business to refer clients, not the other way around. And an expert? Weren't the cops the experts? But, yes, criminal investigations and cryptanalysis were likely to be much more different than alike.

Well, in this case, who is this decryption expert?

"A private detective."

Officer Donma cracked a smile for the first time there.

Well, he was trying to get rid of his troubles by throwing them over his shoulder, and he had a certain swagger about him. "I'd like to introduce you to detective Okitegami Kyouko."

5

"How do you do? Private detective Okitegami Kyouko at your service."

The white-haired woman who appeared in the parlour, saying those words, took Yuinouzaka by surprise with her youthful looks. He had met all manner of eccentric characters through his work and was of course no fool to judge ability by appearance or age alone, but, in the same way, he knew the importance of the first impression.

Balancing these considerations, the interim assessment he gave the detective who was deeply bowing her white-haired head was "incalculable"—he couldn't quite get a read on her. Her smile was placatory but her manner distant, and though she and the officer both wore glasses, there was something about the way she wore hers that made it seem as if there was a thick pane of glass between them.

Im respect to his request that their meeting remain confidential, here she was dressed in trainers and a grey tracksuit looking like some sort of delivery driver. That disguise—he had to give it some harsh critique—How can she wear drab work clothes so fashionably?

(So this is...)

(This is the 'Forgetful Detective'?)

From the beginning, Yuinouzaka was reluctant to accept Officer Donma's offer to refer him to a private detective. Whether well-meaning or an attempt to pass the buck, it had not seemed very appealing. Even had Yunouzaka had nothing to hide, it must be said that any businessman should balk at sharing sensitive information that could expose his company's vulnerabilities with an outsider, especially a private detective. But, "There's no need to worry about such things," the officer was having none of it.

"No matter what request you make of her, no matter what consultation you seek, by the end of the day she would have forgotten all about it—Kyouko-san has a memory that only lasts a day, she is a vault of secrecy. The ultimate forgetful detective."

Could such a person exist? Could someone with a memory span of only twenty-four hours operate a detective agency? Yuinouzaka had his doubts, naturally. But he also had investigative skills of his own based on his job. Once he looked into it, he found that the 'forgetful detective' was quite famous, he just hadn't heard of her.

In fact, it could be said that up until now, Yuinouzaka not hearing about her was, in a way, inevitable. Enmusubito's principle as "matchmakers," placing a strong emphasis on building connections between people and expanding networks, in contrast to her Okitegami Detective Agency's approach of "forgetting all about the job," essentially severing connections and ties one after another—was diametrically opposed.

Less oil and water—more fire and ice.

Had it not been this, and for the police intermediation, the president of a social networking company and the forgetful detective would probably never have crossed paths.

So out of natural curiosity, and admittedly some ulterior professional motives hoping this encounter may lead to future business, Yuinouzaka had Officer Donma introduce him to the detective. Of course, the first priority remained to break the code left by his vice president.

With the assurance that she would forget anything said, Yuinouzaka could disclose to her what he couldn't to the officer, even potentially unfavourable company details. Detectives, like lawyers, cannot disclose information detrimental to their clients.

Naturally murder would change things, but after conferring with Officer Donma, Yuinouzaka had almost completely stopped fearing his name appearing in the decoded dying message. Such a thing, he thought, would be even less evidentiary than he imagined.

More than anything else he yearned for a swift answer, or at the very least, a conclusion.

If it was confirmed that it was not, in fact, a secret code, then so be it. He could make his peace and move on.

For one thing, you could say that Kyouko, the forgetful detective, was perfect for the job—she even holds the title of "fastest detective."

Solve any case in a day—the fastest.

...Granted, given she forgot every request by the next day, it goes without saying, she naturally had no choice but to solve them the same day. And such inevitability suited Yuinouzaka just fine.

He had swiftly given up his conjecture early on, but could the late vice president's code be cracked in just a single day? Looking at it objectively, he really doubted that... But still...

"Well then, since speed is of the essence, let's keep introductions brief. Yuinouzaka-san, I know this is sudden, but may I take a look at the materials straight away?"

Kyouko-san's speech conduct was speedy indeed, likely sensing from the police referral that further pleasantries were unnecessary. And he was glad to skip any superficial probing—no need to prod an unhurt belly, much less a sore one. Still, just to be on the safe side, there was one thing he needed to confirm with her beforehand.

"Forgive me, Kyouko-san, I understand your agency guarantees absolute confidentiality, but..."

"Certainly. I'll have forgotten it all by tomorrow. By all means, open your heart and tell me everything."

"...I fear some company shame will surface. While I understand you'll forget all about it tomorrow, can you guarantee you'll keep the secret until then?"

"No guarantees there I'm afraid—do enjoy the thrill."

Playing innocent.

He felt that much more reassured than he thought.

"But don't worry, I'm a slave to money. Pay me what I'm due and your secrets are safe with me." ... This though, made him feel she couldn't be trusted at all.

However, the Okitegami Detective Agency's daily rate, which far exceeded the market rate, did reassure him—if not of her trustworthiness, then at least of her truthfulness.

So Yuinouzaka caved.

From his pocket he pulled a photograph—shot of the crime scene lent to him by Officer Donma, and also a photograph of the living room of Fuchibuchi's house, not of the body of course, but of the dying message.

It was hardly the sort of thing to be shown to just anyone, but given the generosity with which the officer lends these photos, he seems to have no regard for it. Either that, or he trusted Kyouko-san to be able to handle this.

Either way, since he could thus hand a photograph of the message he could not capture, Yuinouzaka felt that the current was in him—if she could break the code safely.

"Hmm..."

Said Kyouko-san, peering at the photograph, holding it up to the fluorescent light above as though appraising its value itself.

You don't have to bring it so into your glasses, it's high resolution and pretty readable. She scrutinized it intensely—too intensely, he thought—angling and flipping it this way and that, first in her right hand, then her left.

"Do you, er, notice anything? I'm thinking it represents a twenty-five digit number."

Somewhat blatantly, but unable to bear the silence, Yuinouzaka said something to lead her on. Though he'd reassured himself all too well, the thought of her decoding his name from the cipher still unnerved him.

It will be fine.

The victim's testimony alone—is meaningless.

Again, like a spell, Yuinouzaka chanted the words he had repeated many times in his mind.

"Here you are,"

She said and finally tore her eyes away from the photograph—or rather tore the photograph away from her eyes—and handed it back to him just as it was.

For an awfully long time, Yuinouzaka thought, she'd been staring at it, but in the end it could not have been more than ten minutes.

Ten, no more—only ten minutes and she cracked the code?

They say she's fast, but this was—too fast.

"Um... Kyouko-san."

"Let me confirm a few things, if I may,"

She held up a finger to stop Yuinouzaka in his tracks, where he leaned forward without thinking.

"Those twenty-five digits—it is a safe combination, a passcode of some kind, correct?"

Sharp.

Had he been too forward in his hint, after all—but did asking such a question mean that the code represented what Yuinouzaka hoped?

He'd sooner not get into the messy details if he could avoid it—murder motives and all that—but it seemed he had little choice. Asking for the solution with his cards hidden was wishing for too much.

"You guessed it. It's the combination to the safe in the vice president's office—which I thought Fuchibuchi-san had left for me before he passed. That's why I asked you here, Kyouko-san."

Yuinouzaka then glanced at the parlour door. "If you necessary, I'll show you later...it's a big one, in the vice president's office. Only Fuchibuchi knew the combination... Oh, and if it turns out to be a clue pointing to his despicable murderer...well, that's fine in itself, I suppose it would have been worth calling for you still..."

He added, but perhaps unnaturally, Kyouko-san was unresponsive—well, it's somewhat better to be thought of as a ruthless businessperson who cares only about the company's profits than a murderer.

"There is more than just my patron inside that safe, I take it?"

"Your patron?"

Unaware of what was meant, Yuinouzaka looked blank—presumably, money—maybe she considered it in poor taste to say "money" directly, but this choice of words was in fact poorer.

"If you have valuables in there and can't get them out, all you have to do is get a safe opener to retrieve them. There must be some reason you can't do this—some company secret, perhaps, that would be embarrassing if revealed? Is this what you want me to discretely remove from the safe?"

"U-um, yeah... Yes."

He could only nod.

It was not so much fast or sharp as it was unpleasant having his purpose seen through—this couldn't be mere logic.

Yuinouzaka was also an intuitive sensibility person, so he could tell—this detective had seen through him sensually. One could say there is a kind of sloppiness in saying everything that comes to mind in a wild guess, and then if it misses, it misses and that's all right too—a crude guess, but effective if it yielded the reaction she wanted.

Yuinouzaka was not at all relaxed, but he knew if he was careless, at this rate, with no regard for the dying message, she might deduce he was the killer. He reasserted himself and, grudgingly,

"There's...address books, in the safe,"

He said.

It was genuine reluctance, or so he'd meant to imply, overplaying it if anything, to suggest he had nothing more to hide.

It may have been artifice, but necessary artifice—reckless as it was to invite a detective into the firm, they'd come too far now to back down.

"There's little need, I'm sure, to explain the nature of our business further. Facilitating connections between people, a broker of personal contacts—naturally we retain a great many address books, and obtaining those is our primary duty."

"I see, these books are a sort of master register, containing those valuable contacts and thus confidential company secrets you wouldn't want an outsider accessing?"

As expected, not having the whole picture, she was slightly off base. Maybe purposefully off base, to test him.

Such a game of horse trading would get them nowhere. Better just to lay his cards on the table.

What's the use of worrying about it now? She'll forget it bu tomorrow.

"What Fuchibuchi had hidden away in that safe were illegally obtained address books. I should make clear I was unaware of this."

He'd meant to avoid sounding defensive, but this much was true, he had not known.

That his trusted vice president had long been compiling these 'address books' through unlawful, or at least legally dubious, means, using them to build the firm's connections—he couldn't believe it.

As the one in charge, not knowing itself was a problem, and Yuinouzaka did not pretend this could be waved away as ignorance. Right versus wrong, it was plainly wrong.

So he was shocked when he learned of it and immediately confronted his partner—but Fuchibuchi showed no remorse whatsoever.

It seemed that his friend was quite oblivious of the fact that he was doing anything 'wrong'—on the contrary, he was doing the company a great service with these 'address books.' The reason for his silence was that he was doing the company a favor by keeping his mouth shut about his illegal activities.

For the company.

I did it for your sake.

Whenever he was told that, his friend's words were like gibberish to him. If the affair became public, the company was ruined first of all, and so was he—this was what he was trying to get across, but the discussions never went anywhere.

There were many things they could not agree on. The only copy of the dangerous address books that he had, Yuinouzaka on getting rid of it immediately, but the stubborn Fuchibuchi refused to tell him the combination to the safe, intent instead on acquiring new ledgers—now that Yuinouzaka was wise to him, he schemed more brazenly. Indeed he was so cool and confident that he might have been thinking he could weather the collapse of the company once or twice and simply start over.

In that case, then—our values are worlds apart.

The company was the result of the cooperation of them both, and Yuinouzaka was determined to protect it by any means necessary—even breaking the law to conceal its illegality. Even kill his friend.

...Still, he thought he had given him a chance—before bludgeoning him on the head. Yuinouzaka had prefaced it with, 'This is your last chance,' and asked him once more for the safe's combination.

Laughing, Fuchibuchi had not taken it up, though.

Did he really expect he could get away with it or—were the registers worth dying for?

In any case, Yuinouzaka's intentions did not reach his friend—only the desire to kill.

Eliminating the vice president may have prevented further illegal activities, but Yuinouzaka went so far as to believe that the address books in the safe—incriminating evidence—could only be destroyed on his own.

Then came the cipher.

The dying message.

Fuchibuchi's last minute change of heart, revealing the combination at his death?

It was terribly convenient, self-serving thinking on his part. But the fact it was in code gave Yuinouzaka hope.

Fuchibuchi was well aware that the address books were socially illegal, and that the safe's number was not to be written down as such—It's natural to assume that when you're memorizing a twenty-five digit number, you would be encrypting it in some way.

At least less improbable than coming up with a code on the spot as you die is the idea that he wrote the numbers down deliberately, to send a coded message that would not be noticed by anybody who didn't know the code, or so we could speculate.

"I believe I grasp the situation. I will refrain from judging the morality of Fuchibuchi-san's misconduct. Let's just say that I will remain unconcerned, as I will forget about it by tomorrow,"

Kyouko-san said.

Difficult for Yuinouzaka to tell what she was really thinking—putting on a professional face, or was she really unconcerned?

His first impression of her as 'incalculable' was now giving way to 'unfathomable.'

"With the facts established, let us commence the deduction of the forgetful detective, starting with the question of what this cipher might be. As hastily and concisely as possible, shall we?"

6

"First of all, we must never forget that a coded message, whatever its form, exists to be solved. This is the bedrock truth that shall not waver, come what may. In this case we have a dying message, but fundamentally any cipher is a message cast towards someone, so pray keep that firmly in mind."

Met with a plea to "pray keep" this information in his mind, Yuinouzaka didn't know what expression to assume and settled on an ambiguous smile.

(A message...meant for me, from Fuchibuchi. Something like "I'm leaving the company to you" or "Now it's your turn to play the villain"...?)

"Let's take this step-by-step. Method number one to decryption—in cases when the ciphertext has inherent meaning..."

"It...can lack meaning?"

Yuinouzaka dared to ask, offering a polite murmur of interest—though really, with not a shred of detective mind, he didn't care for lectures and wished simply for the answer, if she had deciphered the twenty five digits. But, mindful of his role as client, he curbed his impatience.

To which Kyouko-san replied, "Of course it can," of course.

"So to speak, does the surface text have coherent meaning, or not? Think of Nostradamus' prophecies, for example. All those attempts to decipher what the great king of terror symbolizes, or who Angolmois represents, and such."

He was dumbfounded at her pulling out something so old-fashioned as Nostradamus, but soon he realized such was expected of the forgetful detective whose knowledge and experiences were reset every day instead of accumulating.

Completely unaffected by the vertical axis of time, she could only refer to antiquated analogies.

Her views were cut into pieces.

(Each day waking up to a world with different views, what does it feel like...? How on earth do you make it work?)

Such was the way that Yuinouzaka's thoughts were slightly derailed, and then,

"Applying this method to Fuchibuchi-san's message... doesn't the first line, 'the round and square are at odds' make you naturally think of 'squaring the circle'?"

The forgetful detective continued.

Squaring the what now?

It rings vague bells, but he couldn't think of it right away. Something from his school examinations?

"A problem that requires using only a compass and ruler to construct a circle and square with equal areas. You know it? It's one of the three great Greek puzzles in mathematics," She explained.

"Ahhh, yeah, that one."

Despite not quite remembering, he nodded along.

"To be called one of the great unsolved problems, I imagine it's a tough one."

"It's been proven impossible to solve."

The one-and-done chime was met with a lame reply—an unsolvable problem. What's the sense of that? What was the thought of the mathematician who kept trying unsolvable problems when he came across the proof—suddenly Yuinouzaka began to feel uneasy about the really proper answer to Fuchibuchi's cipher.

"Uh, would the second and third lines represent the other two problems? Um...trisecting an angle and...doubling a cube, was it?"

At the words uttered while searching his memory as if to rip out every nook and cranny of his brain, Kyouko-san shook her head with, "That's what I thought at first."

"While it doesn't follow the 5-7-5-7-7 structure of a *jisei* death poem, it does rhyme and keeps to the theme of geometry, like a meaningful cipher—the writing on the back of a treasure map, or the left eye socket of a skull indicating something. I could just about accept reading the 'inverse triangle' in the second line as referring to the angle trisection problem, but it's pushing it to force 'straight line' in the third to refer to a cube, I'd think."

Even if meaningless, a good cipher can still present a semblance of coherence on the surface, she added blandly.

Brute force decryption, huh.

It seemed that some time and effort would be required before the answer was revealed; this was the resolve that Yuinouzaka came to—even the fastest detective seemed to prefer a more roundabout approach, almost as if she disliked rational shortcuts. Slow and steady.

"So, method number two: when the coded message is meaningless."

"Well...if it's meaningless, isn't there no solution?"

"That's not necessarily true. Imagine a nonsensical text with the 'ta' character inserted randomly throughout, but with a racoon illustration off to the side—what would you think?"²

Needless to say, even a child would know the answer that, the difference between this code and the earlier circle area problem is stark. But the point was made clear.

Rather than taking the surface meaning, some key must be applied to transform the text and reveal its true significance—that's what the detective was talking about.

In simple terms, it could be 'read every fourth character' or 'only read the kanji' or even 'connect the first character of each line' like a kakizome. With this in mind, Yuinouzaka looked again at the photograph of the dying message.

There were of course no raccoon illustrations. Such a simple code would not be worth the attention of a detective.

² The word 'tanuki' in Japanese sounds like "remove (nuki)," hence the symbol of a raccoon implies 'remove' the 'ta' character.

"They say on the internet, prime numbers are used as keys to encrypt passwords."

He had said it merely to pass the time, and Kyouko-san had merely tilted her head in response—unlikely not to know prime numbers while knowing the circle area problem. It was more likely she couldn't bridge 'internet' and 'password' together.

Just when had her memories stopped accumulating? Suddenly he found himself pondering her.

To speak of it, how can she know she's a detective if she doesn't remember anything? Without accumulating memories, would it not be extraordinarily difficult to comprehend that your own memories do not accumulate?

The answer to that question,

"Method number three is when there is meaning in handwriting or penmanship, not in the intent of text."

Revealed itself when Kyouko-san rolled up her sweatshirt sleeve.

On the bare, slender, pale arm was written:

'I'm Okitegami Kyouko. 25 years old. Detective. Chief of Okitegami Detective Agency. Memory resets when I sleep.'

Now he understood; she wrote a note on her skin to keep her from losing herself. If the loss of memory could be likened to death, then this, too, was akin to a dying man's message.

While her ingenuity could be admired, this message seemed to him to be anything but a cipher. It is at best the most primitive and means nothing more than that.

"That's not quite it. The writing shows something of my state of mind when I wrote this message. The neatness of my handwriting suggests I wasn't in a panic writing hastily in dire straits. And the fact that it's written in water-based ink implies I didn't have access to oil-based pens when I wrote this... The smaller size of the 'agency' characters shows I hesitated on where to break the line. Beyond the literal meaning, handwritten text contains a treasure trove of information."

Graphology—is it?

In this digital age we tend to forget, but ugly handwriting aside, there are still things that can only be read in handwriting. That, too, could be a cipher.

Huh.

That is, Fuchibuchi's message contains additional meaning precisely because it's handwritten...or bloodwritten, so to speak?

If so, Yuinouzaka was a right fool for not photographing the scene and just memorising the text. Though even looking at this photo, he was none the wiser. The only thing that stood out was the messy handwriting, which is understandable given the circumstances... but to fault that seemed cruel.

Or, perhaps, there was a red sheet underneath that would reveal the true message if held up to the light? Hard to imagine a neardeath murder victim would go to such lengths, though...

"Yes, this is the fourth method: requiring of additional physical tools to decipher. When you get to this point staring at the cipher

itself will get you nowhere—you have to examine the physical situation and artifacts, not only the text."

"Oh, I see!"

Blast. She's not about to suggest they visit Fuchibuchi's flat and examine the living room where he died, is she? No matter how close they were as business partners, he couldn't imagine the police granting access to an active crime scene...And he had no desire to revisit the site of his friend's murder.

"I was prepared to do just that if necessary to cover all possibilities, but thanks to your hint I believe we can narrow down the options considerably."

He didn't recall giving any hints. If he had the wit to crack it he would have done so.

"But you did give one. Twenty-five digits."

"Ahhh..."

Oh, was she referring to that explicit leading question he had spat out all too willingly in his anxiety? If she had narrowed down the range of answers by that, he might have led the expert astray.

In theory, just as his name could be contrived from the text given, so too could a twenty-five digit number be forged by twisting words around. But if that doesn't open the safe, it was all meaningless anyway.

It's not a number he wanted, but the ledgers.

Before he realized it, he'd become determined to open that safe, if only to avoid putting Fuchibuchi's death to waste. "So? Kyouko-san, what is the answer you have narrowed it down to?"

"Don't rush, I am not yet finished going through the cipher analysis methods,"

She said, as if to placate his impatience. The lecture wasn't over? Here he was thinking she had finished explaining and was beginning to breathe a deep sigh of relief.

"Method number five, in cases where the cipher is wrong or the encrypted text incomplete. These are tricky to decipher. If the problem statement is erroneous, a legitimate approach won't work."

"Do we really need to consider cases like that? If the rules are wrong, there's no way to interpret it at all, right? If it's unsolvable."

As with the three great unsolvables—'insolvable' would be the solution.

"Mistakes or omissions don't need to be considered and may leave no room for interpretation. But if they are intentional obfuscations by the creator, they certainly do, and this is extremely important. While I've talked about many methods, the truth is, this is the very first thing that should be examined."

Intentional—deliberately made?

What kind of petty cipher would that be—weren't ciphers meant to be solved? No it wasn't impossible. A dying challenge rather than a dying message. Leaving a meaningless but cryptic-looking text just to watch him flail helplessly about like this from the afterlife?

That'd be in terrible taste and a complete waste of his time, only strong-armed into pointless expense.

The detective who called herself a slave to money surely wouldn't give Yuinouzaka a discount even if it proved to be unsolvable ... Oblivious to such scheming thoughts of her employer, Kyouko-san continued on:

"The reason to intentionally make an incomplete, unsolvable cipher is to filter out random blind guesswork, you see."

My natural enemy, as it were—she said.

Mm... So rather than pettiness or spitefulness, it is gatekeeping?

"In other words, with computers nowadays, any cipher could just be broken by brute force, no? Even the idea of using prime numbers to generate passwords only 'takes time to crack,' not 'impossible to crack.'"

Whenever the forgetful detective refers to 'nowadays,' the timeline she calibrates to is a mystery. Yuinouzaka was left gobsmacked by the way she casually adapts her perspective to match his—just as that thought crossed his mind,

"Even wartime ciphertexts, once the deciphering method leaked to the enemy, became utterly helpless."

She said such an old-fashioned thing.

By her mind which scrolls freely along the vertical axis of time, Kyouko-san made him feel as if she cared nothing for changes in values.

(Just where does this person place... good and evil?)

Might it be money?

That's the way it is, and it's a value system that runs from the past to the future, and it's easy for a businessman like Yuinouzaka to say that money talks.

"But how can we avoid the mechanical brute force attack on the encrypted message by making an incomplete cipher?"

"Humans can supplement mistakes and imperfections, and adjust them, can't they? Say, hypothetically, instead of a twenty-five-digit cipher, Fuchibuchi-san left only half that—with the first half solved, couldn't you then predict the other half?

Well, that's a bit of a mixed metaphor, but it does sound a little extreme. How can you guess the other half when you don't know half of what you're guessing...

"Like making a cipher for The Tale of Genji using the first half of '源氏' to stand for 'Genji', and confuse things?"

Taking his cue, Yuinouzaka used a metaphor of his own. Being only told "Genji", you would normally associate it with the Heike Genji. While it's meant to refer to the literary work of Murasaki Shikibu—read the answer, not the cipher.

Like a two-fold cipher?

Even against a computer's brute force, two-factor authentication for passwords can be effective—relying on human nature makes it quite complex. Even if the cipher is cracked, it leads not to the solution but a false one—now it was all beyond him.

If the message left by Fuchibuchi was of that pattern, then his decision to leave it to the experts—the police, the private detective—was the right one.

"So, Kyouko-san, decryption method number six is..."

As Yuinouzaka spoke, keen to move the conversation on,

"Oh no. There are only five methods."

She said, glancing at the mantel clock as she did. As he listened to the forgetful detective talk about what ciphers are, thirty minutes passed.

When an answer finally seemed forthcoming, it was a relief to him, though it was not worth the trouble if she had to spend three times as much time explaining it to him as it had taken to solve the cipher—he was just as anxious to get on with his life as he was to get the answer.

So he failed to notice when she had finished her classification of methods as if she was suddenly calling it quits.

"To sum up,"

Said Kyouko-san.

It is too late in the day for that.

"The meaning behind Fuchibuchi-san's three-line poem is a sequence of eleven digits."

"Eleven? Wasn't it twenty five?"

"Precisely. Eleven."

Her tone brooked no argument.

So sure of herself—then the contrived analogies of a moment ago were rooted in reality after all.

Still, eleven digits and not twenty-five... That amounted to less than half. It seemed a stretch that eleven numbers could lead to twenty-five. It wasn't an imperfect cipher or anything; or a safe combination, just a mobile phone number or something jotted down as an aide memoire. Yuinouzaka couldn't help feeling skeptical.

"It is a safe combination I believe. Though we can't know for certain without trying it."

Well if she's so confident, he would first have to hear these purported eleven digits.

"I think the three-line poem was Fuchibuchi-san's own creation, to help him remember the combination," she continued on, interpreting it much as Yuinouzaka had initially.

"When you know the answer is a number sequence, encoding it makes it more memorable—like a mnemonic for a phone number."

"... You keep calling it a three-line poem, is this actually poetry? Then, as in the reading of Nostradamus' great prophecies, we'd have to interpret the text itself for meaning..."

Method number one, already rejected—however, on reflection, Nostradamus' great prophecies, though enthusiastically deciphered, were wildly off the mark.

"No, I mean not in that sense—though well, method number one is not without its clues to breaking the code."

If she did not mean poetry, then what did she mean? His old friend had no interest in verse—Yuinouzaka knew this well, which is why he instantly recognized the message as not a death poem but a cipher.

"Twenty-five or eleven, once you guess the encrypted answer is numerical, there's really nothing to it—May I borrow a pen?"

Prompted, Yuinouzaka retrieved a gel ink pen from his notebook and placed it in Kyouko-san's left hand. She had removed the cap and onto her bared right arm, copied the ciphertext—the three-line poem.

The handwriting matched the note on her left.

Far more legible than the photograph of his friend's scrawl.

Ambidextrous maybe, he mused irrelevantly, as Kyouko-san added slashes to the poem on her arm:

"This should help clarify, no?"

marui/to/shikakui/ga/nakatagai

gyakusankakukei/dewa/narenareshii

cyokusen/nareba/natsukkoi

"...? No, I'm afraid I still don't understand..."

The Challenge of Okitegami Kyouko

She had separated words with slashes, it seemed, but the significance eluded him—easier to read, yes, but no less inscrutable.

"I said it was a poem because it's a piem, you see."

As if throwing a line to a dim client, she elaborated—a piem? Some non-English version of poem?

No, wait... piem?

π?

"So this is...Pi?"

"Yes, 3.14,"

Kyouko-san smiled a knowing smile.

"3.1415926535."

7

まるい(3) /と(1) /しかくい(4) /が(1) /なかたがい(5) ぎゃくさんかくけい(9) /では(2) /なれなれしい(6) ちょくせん(5) /ならば(3) /なつっこい(5)

8

The concept of mnemonics, it turned out, was a close call. In Japan Pi is memorized as such, organizing number harmonies into verses to be recited by heart, like the English version: "How I want a drink, alcoholic of course, after the heavy lectures involving quantum mechanics."

He'd heard English speakers memorise it by the number of letters per word—the term "piem" was new to him, but it must be what they call verses crafted to remember pi.

Fuchibuchi did it in Japanese, that's all, and i was no wonder that it was nonsense. If that's the case, then eleven digits would be more than enough—half that, even.

Yuinouzaka doesn't remember Pi beyond four decimal places himself, but a quick search would reveal twenty-four, a hundred, as many as you like. With word lengths matching pi's digits closely enough to seem non-coincidental, that would suffice. As long as it jogs your memory that the safe combination is pi, that's all you need. A bit of playfulness, nothing more.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. Quite careful, you might say...to stop at eleven digits instead of twenty-five. And..."

[&]quot;And what?"

"Oh, nothing."

It seemed that he had been put off, but then, having got the answer right, he didn't care about the details. As someone who knew Fuchibuchi well, he could see hints of Kyouko-san's boastfulness—that is, probably he simply ran out of ideas after eleven digits.

"By the way, do you happen to recall the eleventh and twelfth decimal places of pi, Kyouko-san?"

"Eight and nine."

That clinched it.

He hammered home his unthought-of theory. No way could he naturally rhyme an eight-syllable and nine-syllable Japanese word.

"Yes, well you know, piems in Japanese are tricky—with logograms, you could break '丸い' into 'maru' 'i', '逆三角形' into 'gyaku' 'sankaku' 'kei'. A mnemonic is easier to remember, frankly."

Kyouko-san was brutally frank.

"Starting with 'round' does certainly give a clue it is about pi—that is, the point of method number one. An expert might solve it in two seconds."

Two seconds is going too far, even for with the hint. It is not clear whether the answer is correct or not... Until Yuinouzaka punched it into the safe himself, he could not rest easy.

Thinking this, as he rose from the sofa, the parlor door opened of its own accord—and in strode Officer Donma, manners cast aside.

The bookish man in spectacles.

He was chief investigator in the Fuchibuchi Yoshitoshi murder case, and it was he who had introduced Yuinouzaka to the forgetful detective; but the demeanor of him today was markedly different from their past conversation.

Of course, he had every right to come into this waiting room, having gone through proper channels and having made an appointment in advance, but it's not as if the police just came unannounced every day—The employee who had guided him here was visibly unsettled.

The men behind Officer Donma looked like detectives too... The air wqa thick with tension. At any rate, he didn't feel any warm feelings.

"Just as I prerequested,"

Said Kyouko-san in response to their entrance with a nonchalant air, without even getting up from her seat.

"Should I not contact you within thirty minutes, please come find me."

(.....?)

It didn't make sense—it was a more enigmatic declaration even than the cipher. What was that?

So all that hemming and having over cipiers, refusing to announce the solution, she was just stalling for time, was she? The meandering lecture had seemed unlike the reputed fastest detective. Was she watching the clock? Waiting for the police to arrive?

And why?

To turn him in?

"Y-you breached confidentiality!"

Yuinouzaka sputtered, knowing his protest futile.

How could this be.

It was stupid of him to swallow the detective's line about keeping secrets absolute confidential when he knew perfectly well that doctors were under the same obligation to report gunshot and knife wounds.

Here he had spilled everything about the address books and Fuchibuchi's secret, on the pretext that she'd forget it all by tomorrow. No, wait—he'd only mentioned it after Kyouko-san had entered the room. How could she have 'pre-requested' information she didn't yet know existed?

"I am not in violation of anything. It was you who breached confidentiality, Yuinouzaka-san. You've blown your own cover. I kept my promise—you didn't keep yours."

With a cool smile, Kyouko-san added to the confusion. What was he supposed to have done?

...The detective could 'prerequest' information from the police—not about the address books, but about the murder?

Still, the message didn't point to him—

"With a ciphertext, you should seek the author's intent, not a solution,"

Said she, as if it were a question on a literature examination.

Or rather, one of legal interpretation.

"Here you should have considered the goal of Fuchibuchi-san's message; the value of Pi or the combination is secondary."

(Why would he leave me, his friend, the combination if not to reveal it to me?)

Was he mistaken?

When told otherwise, he really didn't see how it could be—since the numbers have all been deciphered, outwardly it could only be explained as a code meant solely for him. Was Fuchibuchi's intention elsewhere?

"You might say I read too many detective novels, but it seems most logical to assume a dying message is left by the victim to identify the killer. However, a unilateral accusation from the victim does lack evidentiary weight."

Then Kyouko-san turned to Officer Donma with a gaze more guarded than one would expect amongst acquaintances.

Ah, right.

Officer Donma had introduced her to him, and naturally Yuinouzaka had regarded them as 'accomplices' of sorts. But in Kyouko-san's eyes, Officer Donma was also a complete stranger until today—the forgetful detective without human connections.

"And so Fuchibuchi-san did not attempt to directly point to the culprit, imstead he left a cipher. The answer to the cipher itself didn't matter—with infinite interpretations, it can be read any way you like. However,"

She turned to look at Yuinouzaka. Her eyes behind her glasses—gentle, yet distant.

Immense distance.

"Yuinouzaka-san. You alone reacted to it."

"....!"

"By wishing to decipher it, you led us right to you. Yes, this was exactly Fuchibuchi-san's intent in leaving the message. I heard from Officer Donma you were the only one moved in response to the poem, and that is why I was hired. As soon as I heard the story, I thought 'Could he be Fuchibuchi's killer?"

He didn't mean to indicate the culprit's identity.

He tried to smoke out him who reacted to the code.

Would Fuchibuchi think up such a plan on his deathbed? While it sounded ridiculous, the 'intent' also made for a much more convincing explanation.

At least, much more convincing than sacrificing himself in the name of friendship like it's some fairy tale, or gallantly giving the combination to his murderer.

Assuming this to be true, Yuinouzaka's hounding of the police and hiring of a private detective then was a betrayal of his duty of confidentiality named self-preservation.

Rather than the victim accusing him, the culprit had incriminated himself. His reaction, as he had rushed to corroborate and validate it, gave credence to a dying message that should have had none.

Not a slip of the tongue, rather a slip-up in solving.

It was no more than his friend urging him to give himself in.

(Calm, calm down... This is not evidence, it's harassment—that's what the officer is trying to do, put pressure on me. not that he has grounds for...)

Just as Yuinouzaka wrestled down his doubts, Kyouko-san rose slowly to her feet and remarked coolly:

"Officer, I'm given to understand there are illegal items secreted in the safe in the vice president's office. Perhaps you would like to hear what Yuinouzaka has to say about it."

Her unabashed words shredded any veil of confidentiality—unless she and the officer had colluded in advance, making this meeting nothing less than an undercover operation.

She had been playing the part of the hired detective to search for a possible motive behind the murder. And with the motive clear and him as the prime suspect, it was an amateur crime. He could hardly imagine enduring the harsher interrogation that would follow.

He had no choice but to concede—he'd been duped.

By Fuchibuchi—And by the forgetful detective.

He was only too ready to take his friend's revenge as just deserts, but he could not muster a single resentful thought towards Kyouko.

"Please don't look at me with such eyes. I'm the one who should be lamenting here. This time, I did not get any remuneration from the police. I ended up working for nothing." "T-then..."

Oh.

She had no intention to honor confidentiality from the start. 'As long as I'm paid what I'm due,' she had said. So if there was nothing to be paid...

Understanding as he did, however, Yuinouzaka hung back.

"But, if that was the case, you could have just broke the cipher for me without having to pry into Fuchibuchi's intentions—"

"I could have taken that route until I heard about those highly illegal registers... But now that I know, I'm afraid not. I said I'd remain ignorant, didn't I? Willfully ignorant and oblivious. I cannot accept payment from you."

She said, not in an accusatory way, but with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I am a slave to money. I believe it to be sacred, marvellous and deserving of the utmost respect and adoration, dazzlingly beautiful."

Therefore, said she, crystal clear.

With no ties or connections, so utterly uncertain of herself, it alone was her sole benchmark, the one universal value that would not change no matter how hard she tried to forget it.

"I shan't take a single dirty penny."

9

The following can be called an epilogue. The police did end up physically forcing open the safe in the office of Enmusubito's vice president. The twenty-five digit number deduced by the forgetful detective resulted in an incorrect password, and still couldn't open the safe.

As it turned out, her guess that the code was Pi was itself correct, but Fuchibuchi's code-making went one better.

"300000000000000000000000000."

——This was the correct PIN to unlock and safe and retrieve the address books, as Yuinouzaka learned when his lawyer told him in jail. He couldn't help a wry smile.

(Ahh... there was a time when Pi was said to be 'approximately three'.)

Across the x, y and z axes, the solution rolls and rolls.

Therefore, instead of a solution, it was a code to mislead.

('Approximate' something, huh? Gave just enough to set me up.)

He'd probably rigged the safe not to open regardless of which detective might try to crack it. Thinking so, Yuinouzaka felt he was

in touch again with something of the man's friendship, for the first time in a while.

For good or ill, it brought a genuine smile to his face, the friendship he could not afford.





Excerpts From Forgetful Detective Related Reports

Competitive Swimmer Drowning Case Report

Written by: Hijiori Oritetsu

Victim: Unagi Kyuugo

Cause of death: Electrocution

(Beginning omitted) so the forgetful detective entered this case as an alibi witness. Strictly speaking, in the form of a witness who was unable to prove his alibi. This was no coincidence, but rather the suspect deliberately taking advantage of the forgetful detective's young age yet full head of white hair and unique appearance to manufacture an alibi. This greatly complicated the case and created many unnecessary troubles. From this perspective, we investigators should feel fortunate to have accidentally obtained the forgetful detective's abilities to help clarify the case. However, I must also solemnly add that if the suspect had not found the forgetful detective but just an ordinary person to provide an alibi, it would surely have taken some time to process, but the case probably would not have become so complicated. Although it was blatantly lazy to sleep soundly during the investigation, the suspect also seemed to have had a backup plan to flee if things went badly, so the forgetful detective's speedy investigation still provided great help in detaining the suspect. Also, to clear up what seems to be much misunderstanding, I will note here that I absolutely did not see the forgetful detective in a swimsuit (End omitted)

Expenses:

- Transport fees
- Snacks and bread
- High-performance hair dryer
- Bento box
- Azuki bar
- Swimsuit (white one-piece)
- Request fee (incl. tax)

Detective time: 13 hours (incl. sleep time)

"Nashorn" Dressing-Room Murder Case Report

Written by: Tooasa Fukachika

Victim: Yanei Sashiko

Cause of death: Bludgeoned to death

(Beginning omitted) Now I must mention the detective who helped investigate this case, the forgetful detective. I want to emphasize that, accepting the request from the chief and appearing at the scene as a fashion advisor, she almost single-handedly uncovered the truth, identified the suspect, and induced his confession, smoothly resolving this case. As the commander at the scene, I must deeply reflect on this. As for the forgetful detective's extraordinary insights into the locked room murder, as described in the appendix to this report, while her ideas may not apply to every case and are perhaps just an extreme perspective as a detective, they will likely prove helpful when dealing with extreme cases. After all, the so-called "locked room" is (middle omitted) Finally, I will add that this was the first time I witnessed the forgetful detective's abilities. Although I only received her assistance from start to finish, if I, as one who worked with her, were to offer harsh advice from experience, I must say there needs to be a thorough review of using an irrelevant excuse like "serving as a fashion advisor" to bring her in. That probably increased costs instead. It would likely save more expenses to have her participate as a detective from the beginning (End omitted)

Expenses:

- "Nashorn" clothing (one-piece dress, jeans)
- Dinner (Italian)
- Alcohol (own expense)
- Request fee (consult fee + detective fee)

Detective time: 8 hours

"Enmusubito" Vice Precident Case Report

Written by: Donma Kezuru

Victim: Fuchibuchi Yoshitoshi

Cause of death: Bludgeoned to death

(Beginning omitted) Subsequently, under the pretext of voluntarily cooperating and providing statements, the interrogation of the company president yielded results that essentially confirmed his involvement in the suspected murder. Ultimately, in all fairness, while we cannot yet say we took a reckless gamble this time, it was still quite a risky move. Even though this was not the first time, it still felt as though we had once again been toyed with and manipulated in the palm of the forgetful detective's hand through her glib words. Speaking of "not the first time", the forgetful detective showed no fear even when facing someone who could be a murder suspect, and her boldness in being alone with him in a room was nothing out of the ordinary for her. If she does not change this risky behavior of charging ahead, we can only keep playing this dangerous game with her. I have no position to advise the senior police officials who shelter the forgetful detective, but if the intention is to keep pushing her forward like this, I hope comprehensive safety measures can also be devised—this is the consensus of all the investigators, and I hope our superiors can take it to heart. (Middle omitted) Let me add one more point for your reference. Although "Enmusubito" [the company] lost its two founding presidents and has faced public condemnation, the employees who remained united and worked hard have now gradually turned its business around. Unlike what the two founders may have thought, it seems the company was kept running not by them, but by the staff working on the frontlines. (Middle omitted) Also, it was a rare treat for the forgetful detective to help us pro bono this time. For us, realizing that she too has an instinct for social justice was a pleasant discovery. However, that said, if the suspect had preemptively paid her a deposit this time, the result probably would have(End omitted)

Expenses: None

Detective time: 45 minutes

Afterword

All of us have had the experience of being told the same story over and over again, as well as having told the same story over and over again ourselves. This tends to happen for two main reasons (in the style of Kyouko-san): 1. the listener has forgotten about the previous telling. 2. The listener remembers hearing it before. You might think case 2 doesn't really happen, but with important, cherished or entertaining stories, there is often a desire to retell them, especially if the reaction wasn't that great the first time. In this case, telling it once isn't enough—you can't help but want to tell it again and again. And from the listener's perspective, if it's a really good story, you actually want to hear it again and again, as well-hoping for an even better reaction the second time around, for example. The troublesome thing (not in the style of Yakusuke-kun³) is that in case 1, it can be hard for the listener to have the right attitude of "hearing it for the first time", thinking "If they forgot they told me this before, it can't have been that important to them..." Of course, such doubts may arise, but if we reflect on our own experiences of retelling stories, the act of forgetting or remembering doesn't necessarily correlate to the importance of the story. We tend to assume we'll remember important things, but people surprisingly remember trivial details too, just as we can easily forget something we thought was important. Ultimately, whether it's case 1 or 2, good conversational etiquette dictates we should listen as if hearing the story for the first time. The real challenge with case 1 is when the storyteller remembers mid-story that they told it before. They're then faced with a choice: 1. Acknowledge they told it already and stop. 2. Don't acknowledge it and push through. Choosing 1 makes it seem like the listener forgot too, so they're forced to pick 2, resulting in this awkward situation where you both know you've had the exact conversation already. Of course, with 1 the listener may have genuinely forgotten, in which case who knows what's true! Probably the least awkward case is when you've both forgotten. By the way, how many times have I told this story now?

³ Troublesome and Yakusuke are written 厄介.

This was the third volume in the forgetful detective series. Conceived for serialization in Mephisto Magazine, the first and second chapters had in fact been published prior to the second volume, although the third chapter was written after it. Given the forgetful nature of our detective, however, such chronological eccentricities are best overlooked. Judging by the chapter titles alone, the stories were imbued with a rather robust detective feel, wouldn't you say? I thoroughly enjoyed portraying the colorful cast of Kyouko-sans. And so ended "The Challenge of Okitegami Kyouko."

Time and time again, I will not forget to reiterate my deepest gratitude to VOFAN who so stylishly brought Kyouko to life, and to Bungaku Third Publishing for publishing the fastest detective with all due haste. My thanks for your past and continued support.

Nisio Isin

The Challenge of Okitegami Kyouko

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西尾維新

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